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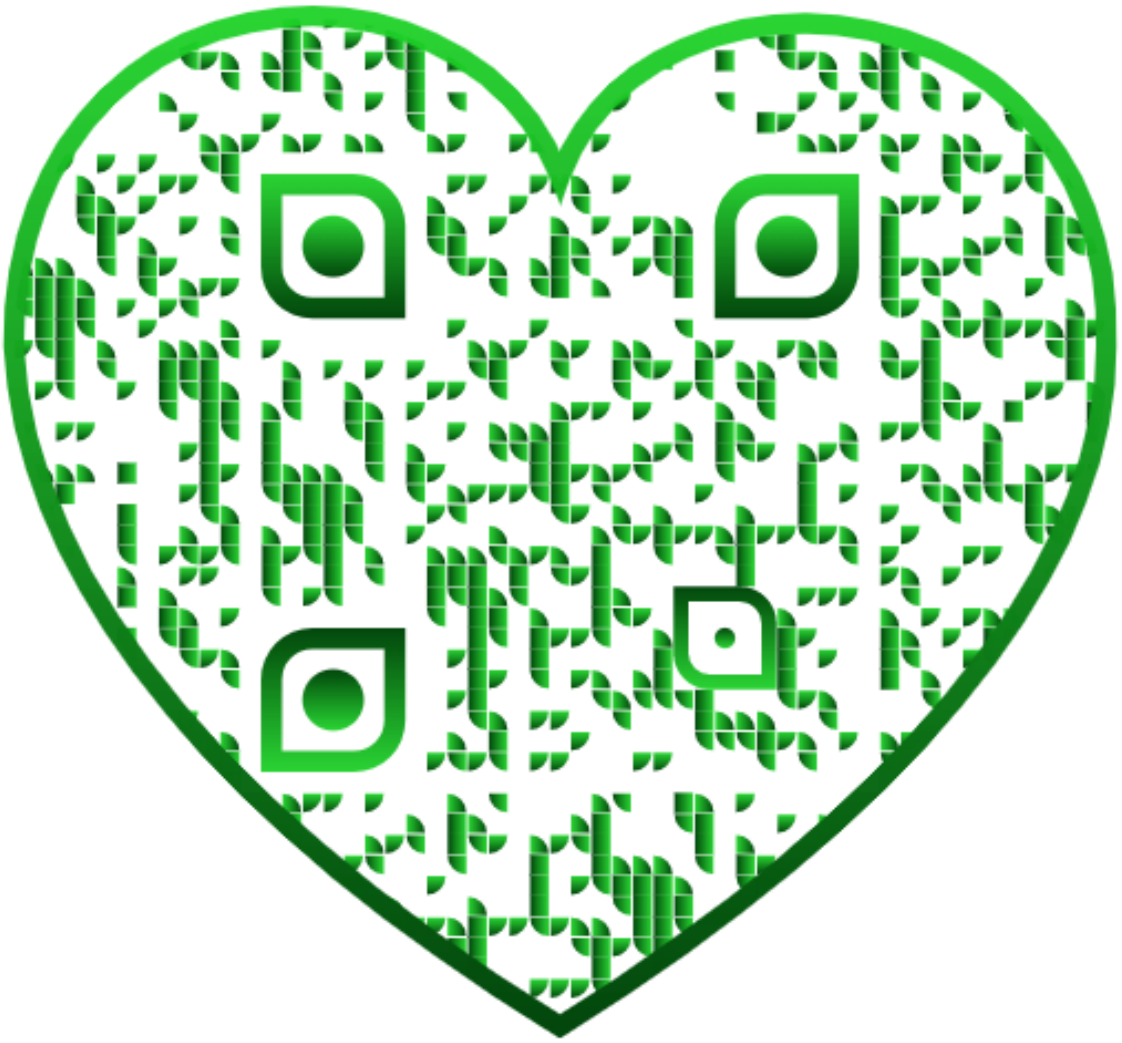

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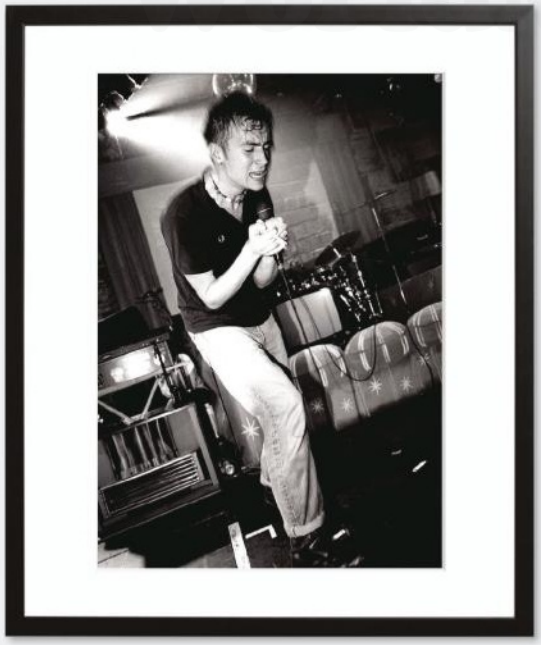

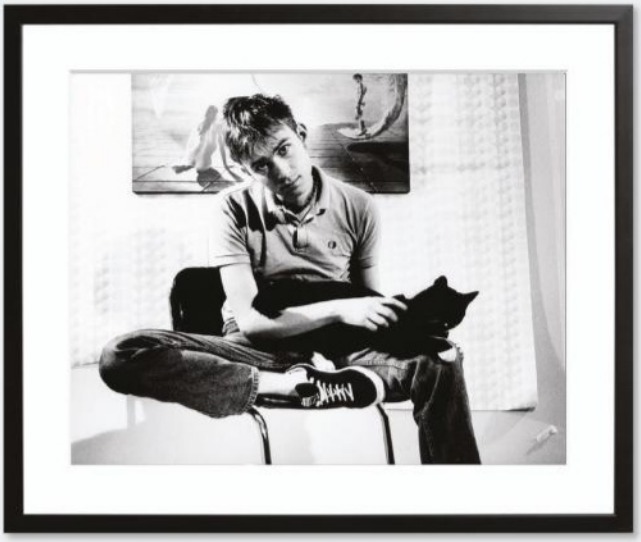

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Blur

Manchester pretenders. Britpop pioneers. Post-grunge revivalists. Psychedelic visionaries. Afropop aficionados. And so much more in between. At no point in their inspirational career did Blur even consider standing still.

Re-evaluating them on the 20th anniversary of their Britpop peak, 'Parklife', you need to take a step back and take in the entire Blur vista – from blank-eyed baggy-ites to pouting pier-pop geniuses, woo-hoo punk rockers to esoteric experimentalists. And there's no better place to do that than the *NME* archive. At every step of Blur's career, we've analysed, interrogated and got hammered with the band. Here, we reprint the biggest and best of those many interviews from throughout the ages. Join Damon on a boozy rampage around Coachella, let Alex take you on a personal tour of his celebrity Soho drinking haunts, catch Graham hiding from fame in the corner of the Good Mixer and, well, come fly with Dave.

As well as all that, we discuss their significance and legacy, reassess all the albums, dig up all the dirt and scandal, gawp at all their buffest pics and try to convince ourselves there's still hope for a new album. Feeling star-shaped? You've come to the right place...

Mark Beaumont, editor

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Blur

THE LEGACY

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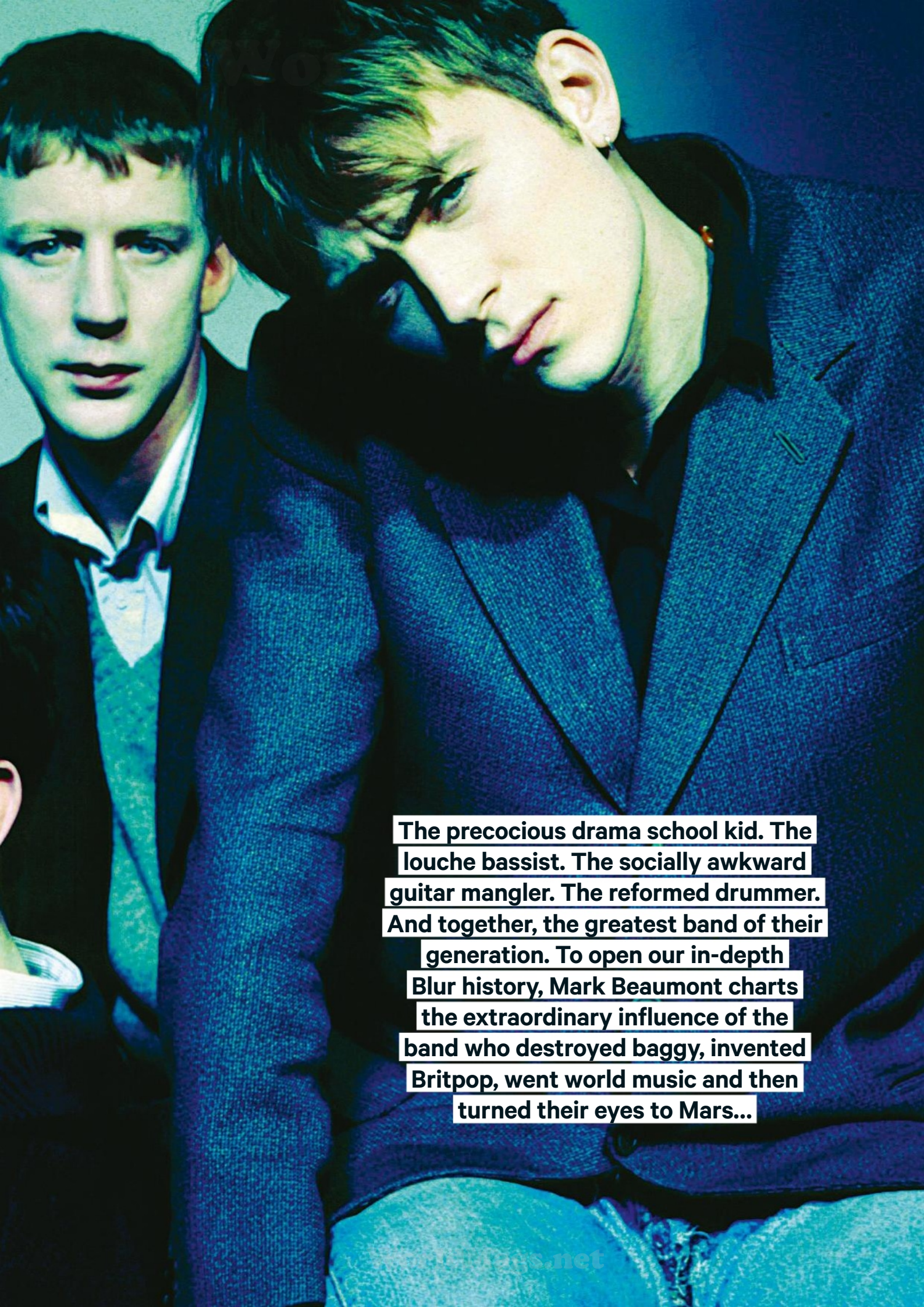

The precocious drama school kid. The louche bassist. The socially awkward guitar mangler. The reformed drummer. And together, the greatest band of their generation. To open our in-depth Blur history, Mark Beaumont charts the extraordinary influence of the band who destroyed baggy, invented Britpop, went world music and then turned their eyes to Mars...

blurfans.net

WHEN THE WORLD IGNORED THEIR BLAZINGLY BRITISH 'POPSCENE' AND AMERICA SHUNNED THEM AS DRUNK BRATS, BLUR STUCK UNWAVERING TO THEIR VISION UNTIL CULTURE CAME AROUND TO THEIR WAY OF THINKING

People say that we're the Rolling Stones and that Blur are The Beatles," Noel famously opined. "We're the Stones and The Beatles. They're the fucking Monkees!"

Not until many years later, when someone gave Piers Morgan his own US chat show, would a man turn out to be so monumentally wrong. 'Being The Beatles' was never about a sound, an attitude or anything as petty as record sales. It was a *mentality*. It was about testing limits – of your own musical potential, and pop culture's ability to absorb it. It was about ceaseless reinvention and rejecting any hint of inertia – such as, say, making a slightly worse version of your last record seven times in a row. It was about picking up and rattling every style and influence to see if you can bend it into a brand new shape, about being so full of impossible ideas that you turn into a *cartoon*. And doing it all while remaining, melodically speaking, as infectious as a zombie bite.

No, Blur were the most Beatles band since The Beatles.

When they emerged late in 1990, they'd come to bury baggy, not to bottom-feed on it. Those early singles, 'She's So High' and 'There's No Other Way', had a tension and urgency that baggy had long since lost, while their debut album 'Leisure' mangled Madchester beats to shoegazing sonics and, buried beneath, distinct hints of the cockney art-pop to come. When the world, as one, ignored their blazingly British 'Popscene' and America shunned them as drunk, parochial brats, they stuck unwaveringly to their vision until culture came around to their way of thinking, then rode their Britpop hobby horse to Grand National victory.

'Blur' was Graham's grungy fightback, all Pavement gnarl, smacked-out swoons and (sonic) youthful freak-outs. '13' embraced expansive psychedelic mood pieces and electronica to explore the tormented corners of Damon's post-Justine psyche in as unindulgent manner as possible. 'Think Tank' took the same experimental approach to Morocco, minus Graham, shunning studios and drawing on a wider world of dub, jazz and African music.

Formula-averse. Repetition-allergic. A wild, unpredictable ride you never wanted to get off. Blur were The Stones, The Beatles *and* The Monkees. And The Kinks, obviously. And to think, it was all down to a pair of (woo-)shoes...

When the cocky second year strode up to him eyeing up his footwear, the 11-year-old Graham Coxon no doubt thought he was about to become the victim of a vicious playground mugging, rather than make a friend for life.

"Your brogues are crap, mate," said the young geezer-child Albarn. "Look, mine are the proper sort."

Rarely is a world-beating band built upon the words "proper sort", a phrase more usually associated with the launch of a new tabloid relationship featuring Joey Essex. But more pertinent to their future success together, perhaps, was young Albarn's eye for impeccable style and his avid sense of competition, even in the realm of smart-casual footwear. As the child of a liberal bohemian theatrical and arts-based family and a star of the small but competitive drama scene at Stanway Comprehensive in Colchester, Albarn was already practiced in the art of one-upmanship – a skill he needed to bolster a fragile psyche frequently beaten down by bullies calling him "posh-stroke-gay". He was also beginning to see his musical interests as essentially competitive too: Damon once won a heat of the Young Composer Of The Year competition. So it was natural, after a short stint at drama school, that Albarn would first throw himself into the deep end of mainstream culture by joining a late-'80s synth pop duo called Two's A Crowd, taking on Stock, Aitken & Waterman at their own game. SAW, unsurprisingly, won.

Nonetheless, Albarn's competitive nature, alongside his talent for finely-wrought pop melodies, would become the engine room of his artistic motivation, and the making of him. He reconnected with Coxon at Goldsmiths College in south London, where Albarn claimed he only enrolled to get access to the bar, and brought the young guitarist into Circus – a new band featuring Rowntree on drums, and soon to be joined by Alex on bass. As the band slowly morphed into Blur, Albarn posited them as baggy's executioners, there to tear down Madchester's *Wizard Of Oz* edifice, pogo in the wreckage and build their own fresh pop culture from the ruins. Soon they were single-handedly taking on the entire continent of North America and its deluge of grunge sludge and then, as the new

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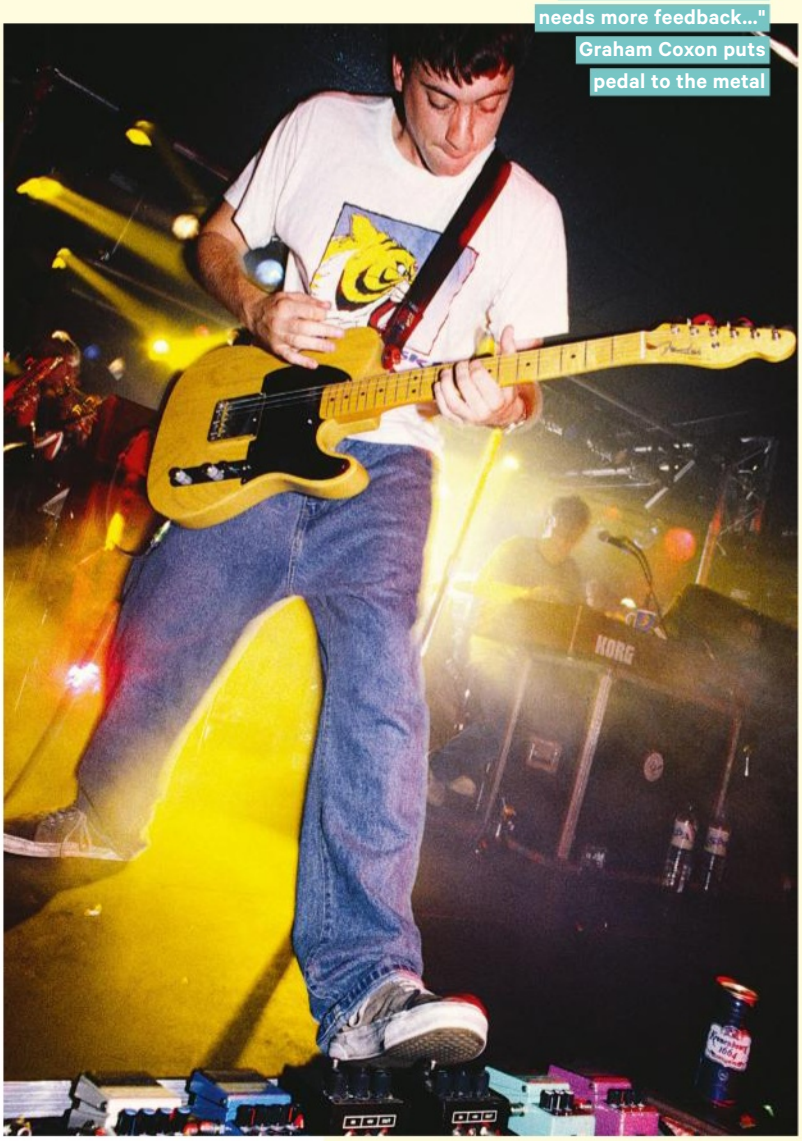
Dave Rowntree: pilot, politician, and a pretty good drummer, now you mention it

"This music hall romp needs more feedback..." Graham Coxon puts pedal to the metal



suave British aesthetic began to catch hold, they turned on their contemporaries too. There was no real need for Damon to make his Blur vs Suede spat so personal – he had, after all, got the girl – but he refused to lose on any front and the press fetishising of Suede when Blur were suffering their post-'Leisure' fall from fashion riled him to a series of bitter bite-backs. Britpop became a race for the prize – and, for the most part, it was Blur setting the pace.

Damon's constant need to battle his way to the top would only subside once he'd got there, and found that in such a massive public conflagration he could no longer dictate the rules. After the chart battle with Oasis had elevated both bands to the level of '90s cultural behemoths and made Blur uncomfortable tabloid fodder, two crucial things happened. Firstly, to avoid any more uncontrollable or adverse publicity, Blur turned their competitive nature inwards, fighting for control of albums and pitting themselves against their own limitations instead of rival bands. Hence 'Blur', '13' and 'Think Tank' were all wildly inventive, sprawling and experimental creations, each its own distinct but perfectly evolved planet of sound orbiting the 'Life' trilogy's pop supernova. Blur's internal divisions would ultimately see them implode in a messy spew of rehab, oud and Fatboy Slim, but it had already made them the most relentlessly groundbreaking band of their generation. Or at least, Radiohead fans, the most relentlessly groundbreaking band of their generation that kept the tunes in.

Secondly, in the media spotlight, the characters began to shine. There were the characters that inhabited the songs, the residents of Albarn's theatrical high street Britain that made the 'Life' trilogy albums feel like a state-of-the-nation cartoon strip – the Ernold Sames on their dreary suburban commuter trains, the quango middle-managers with the kinky S&M closet peccadilloes, the disenfranchised punk kids, the dirty pigeon-feeders, the squatting urban lovers and the civil servants driven to full-on psycho Reggie Perrin breakdowns by the pressures of hard-line normality. Blur's critics called these caricatures, and lined →

Damon soaks up the adulation during Blur's Seaside Tour, September 1995

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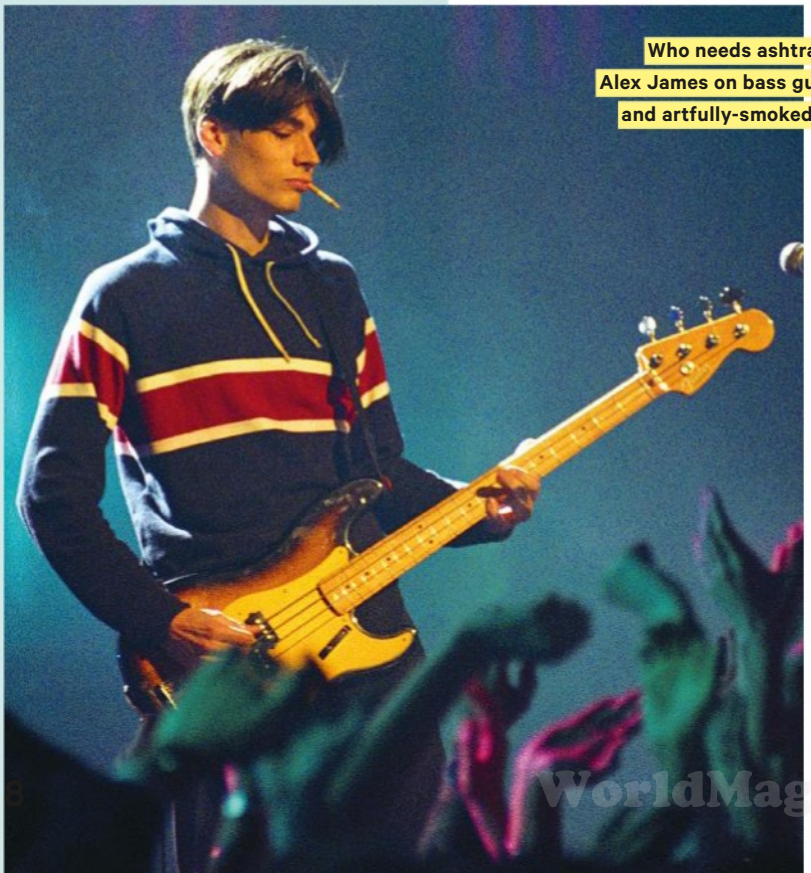
up to label the band 'arch', 'pretentious', 'art-school' or 'inauthentic', painting them as snobbing middle-class pretenders sneering at and patronising strands of British culture they didn't belong to or understand. But these characters were more than stereotypes, and together they created a richer whole, illuminating all of the frustration, drudgery, selfishness, desperation, ennui and alcoholic abandon of pre-millennial Great Britain. Suburban soap opera, end-of-pier parochialism, portrait of urban low-living – all (rubbish) modern life was here.

But the men behind the songs were characters themselves. Blur were that rare beast of a band that combined indie credibility with which-would-you-shag-first pop band individuality. While the bassist from Ride would have had trouble recognising himself at 20 paces, Blur were four distinct personalities from which it was easy – nay, essential – to pick your favourite. You had the ex-alcoholic 'sensible' drummer with ambitions in politics and aeronautics. You had the million-quid's-worth-of-champagne-spraying, impossibly pretty members' club gadabout bassist flagrantly living out every hifalutin, hob-nobbing pop star fantasy like a Soho Gatsby. You had the awkward, ultra-indie guitar geek uncomfortable with being recognised anywhere outside a well-worn corner of his favoured Camden boozer. And you had the cocky intellectual mastermind, philosopher and showman at the front, for whom "it's all theatre" and a grand all-encompassing concept automatically came in three parts, included a big ballroom ballad number and rounded off with a nod to Stanley Kubrick. The thinking pop fan's bit of faux-cockney crumpet who, it would transpire, could break as easily as the rest of us. Swoon.

Damon picks up his Award For Innovation at the NME Awards, February 2014



Who needs ashtrays? Alex James on bass guitar and artfully-smoked fag

Even before Gorillaz, Blur made themselves a cartoon band, a living sitcom about four totally ill-fitting types trapped eternally in a tourbus together, waiting for a venue to double-book them with the equally cartoonish Oasis and the slapstick gags to fly. Blur – like, yes, The Monkees – offered something lovable, relatable and fanciable for everyone, and each played their role without ever breaking character.

But this instant accessibility did occasionally shroud the real reason Blur became the greatest pop band of the '90s – their quite staggering musical talent. The songs, we knew, were incredible, but the artistry behind them was sometimes lost amid the spats, the splits and the cheeky winks at Page Three girls. For a puny feller,

PAUL SPENCER, PA, JORDAN HUGHES, CAMERA PRESS/STEVE DOUBLE, CAMERA PRESS/ED SIIRS

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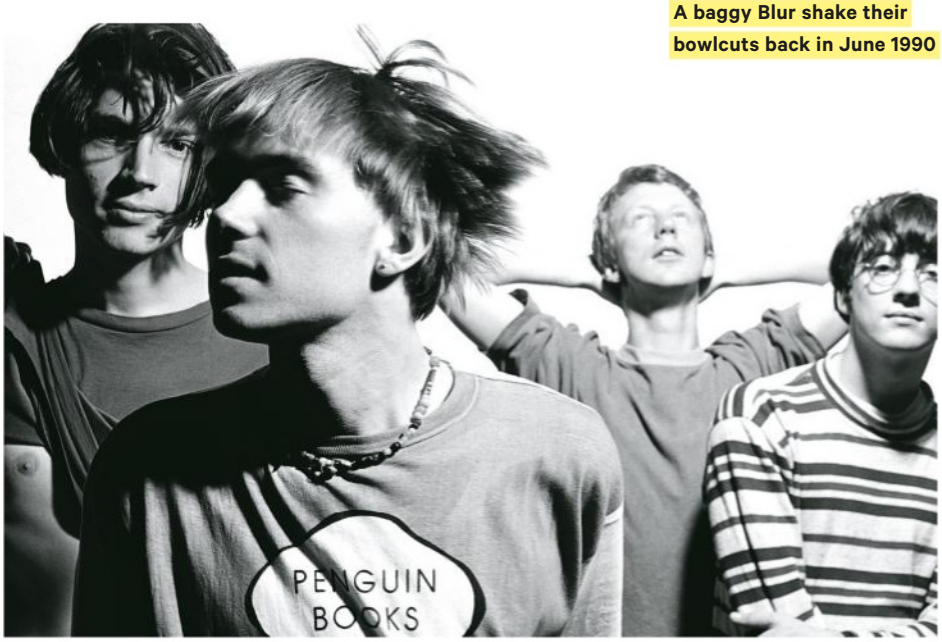
Dave could pound drums like an Inca priest declaring sacrifice season open. For all his insouciant posing, fag-dangling and hair flopping, Alex James was amongst the most elegant, melodic and elaborate bass players outside of the Pixies. Graham Coxon, let's not beat about the bush, was and remains arguably the most accomplished, inventive and downright 'shredding' guitarist of his generation, a sorcerer of sound. And Damon Albarn, as his recent NME Award For Innovation showed, is one of the greatest songwriters in rock history and a true musical manipulator of the masses. Give them what they want, goes his trademark trick, and then when they're begging for more, condition them to appreciate something more *nourishing*.

The most casual clicker through the bonus discs of Blur's '21' box-set will have discovered what a deeply playful and exploratory band they were, trying their hand at every style, from country and western to Bowie glam to chim-chimminy knees-up to ambient Martian wibbles that were intended to actually be played on Mars. And it's fitting that they were selected to provide the soundtrack to interplanetary exploration since, like the Vitruvian man aboard Voyager 1, they're the biological root of most 21st century guitar pop worth listening to.

True, there's not much contemporary music you can lay at the door of 'Leisure' – The Twang, maybe. But Blur's 'Life' trilogy didn't just spark the last great alternative culture takeover – TV, radio and tabloid alike turned indie for those few golden years – but laid the blueprint for British pop music since, followed by The Libertines, Arctic Monkeys and Franz Ferdinand. As the missing link between 'OK Computer' and 'Kid A', '13' arguably splayed open the blinkered brains of rock bands to the possibilities of electronica and psychedelia, pointing the way to Tame Impala, nu rave and even Foals. Without 'Think Tank' rescuing world music from the cred-shriveling clutches of Sting and Paul Simon, there would be no Vampire Weekend and their Afrobeat-channeling ilk. And you can bet your slacker arse that the Yorkshire grunge revival bands like Menace Beach learned to love the filth of 'Song 2' first.

You could argue that the success of Blur and Britpop placed too great an expectation on subsequent alternative rock – that it got the majors and the Brits seriously involved for around 15 years and suddenly *our* bands were expected to battle it out with Westlife and Crazy Frog and lived or died by the same Top 10-by-the-third-single-or-you're-dropped sword. Certainly, its aftershocks threw a few enormous rock acts into the mainstream firmament – Oasis, Pulp, The Verve – and made brief chart sensations of a whole swathe of guitar bands that would otherwise have been floundering around the Midlands lavatory circuit covered in leaked transit van brake fluid. You could argue, indeed, that only now has indie returned to its rightful place as the underground underdog. But for a while there we were roused to battle and we ruled the place. And Blur were our Henry V. Our Tyler Durden. Our Beatles. ■

EVEN BEFORE GORILLAZ, BLUR MADE THEMSELVES A CARTOON BAND, A LIVING SITCOM ABOUT FOUR TOTALLY ILL-FITTING TYPES TRAPPED IN A TOUR-BUS TOGETHER, WAITING FOR THE SLAPSTICK GAGS TO FLY



A baggy Blur shake their bowlcuts back in June 1990

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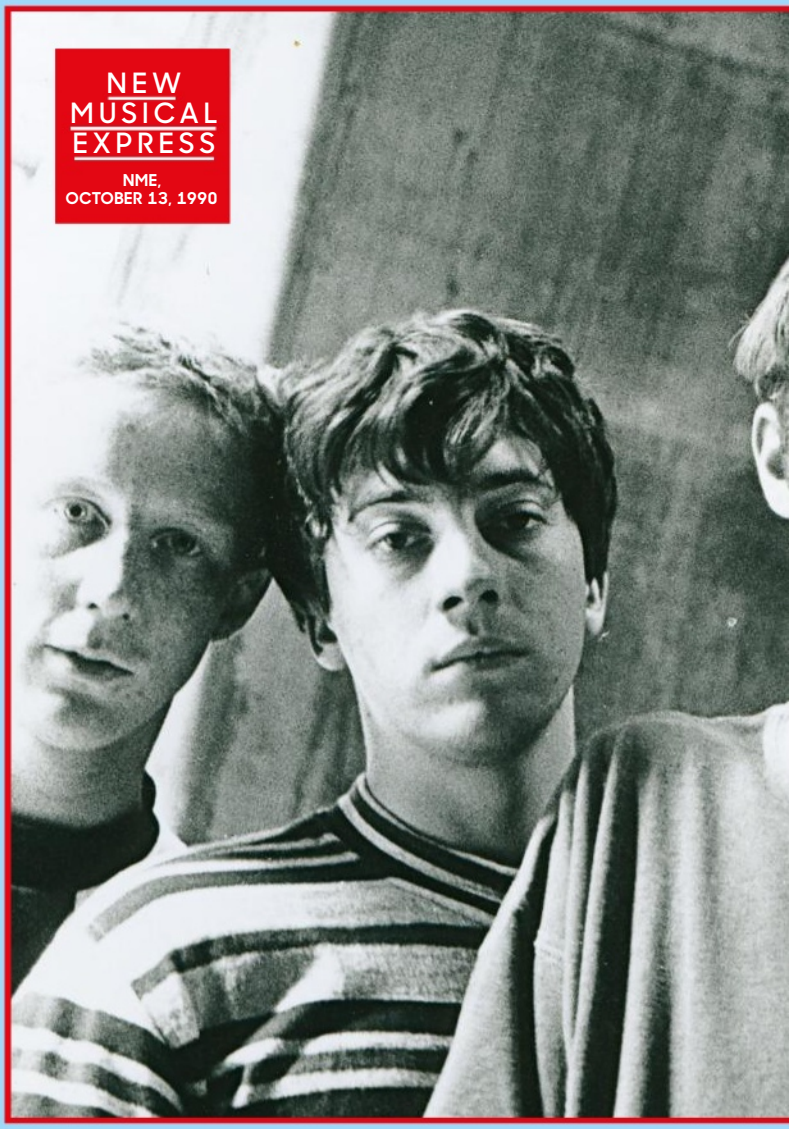
"WE'RE ONE OF THOSE LUCKY BASTA

For their first NME feature, STEVE LAMACQ dragged Blur back to Colchester to discuss burning schools, being sexy and rocking 'til they puked



If your early school days were a dull, uneventful affair, then you certainly weren't in the same class as studying hip-swivellers Blur.

"Our school got burned down seven times in two years," explains wide-eyed vocalist Damon, "and in the end they found out it was our teacher who was doing it. He said in court it was because he'd been overlooked for the deputy headship and he couldn't cope anymore. But he was still teaching us at the same time... burning down the school at night and coming in the next morning and saying 'Sorry, children, someone has set fire to the school again, so we're going to have to move to another building.'"

> "I used to get beaten up quite a lot in Colchester" DAMON ALBARN

This kind of anarchic anecdote sounds like it's straight out of fantasy but Damon swears it's true. The teacher was put away for six years, he adds dramatically.

In the punk heyday, it was the done thing to drift through school and on to art college. Both Blur guitarist Graham and bassist Alex were art students before quitting for music, and Damon was at drama school in East London before swapping theatre for gigs. Picking up drummer Dave from their hometown Colchester scene, the four formed a band called Seymour. They sounded like The Wolfhounds, and resembled a ragged, speed-freak Stone Roses (ie not very good). Enter Food Records, who are developing a knack for taking average bands from the London circuit and helping them fulfil their potential.

Having succeeded with Jesus Jones – previously an appallingly bland outfit called Camouflage – the label signed Seymour and went to work. The band changed their name, cleared up their identity and – KER-CHING! – cash-tills started quivering. This week Blur release their debut 45, a timely, mesmeric dance-trance 12-inch called 'She's So High'. Destined to crack the Top 60 at their first attempt, the powerfully swirling single bears out the craving for Blur which has come not just from The Business (including a recently signed £80,000 publishing deal with MCA) but from an already burgeoning following.

Everyone wants a piece of Blur; the single is a central point between the current indie Ride-style guitar groups to their left and the acidic Manc mobs to their right. In the middle, occupying a more groove-oriented position than Carter USM, Blur are a psychedelic, less formularised version of label mates Jesus Jones. They're cocky, attractive and flog loads of T-shirts. If the next stop's the charts, first there's time for a brief diversion.

To celebrate the release of 'She's So High' we decide to do the interview back in Colchester, where three of the band and I all started out – not far from the aforementioned fire-raising school. It's symbolic that we leave London Liverpool Street in a blaze of sunshine and arrive in Essex to a grey, overcast Friday afternoon.

When Blur grab *Top Of The Pops* status they'll be the first group with Colchester connections to 'make it' in years. Colchester, the oldest market town in Britain, once the jewel-like outpost of the Roman Empire, is a claustrophobically conservative environment to grow up in: its spurious 'nightlife' being governed by two words... SMART CASUAL. It's a terribly un-rock'n'roll place, and at weekends the squaddies from the local garrison go into town to drink their wages and harass the locals. Living here is like living in a wet sponge.

"When I was at school," says Graham, "we were asked to bring in

TIM PATON

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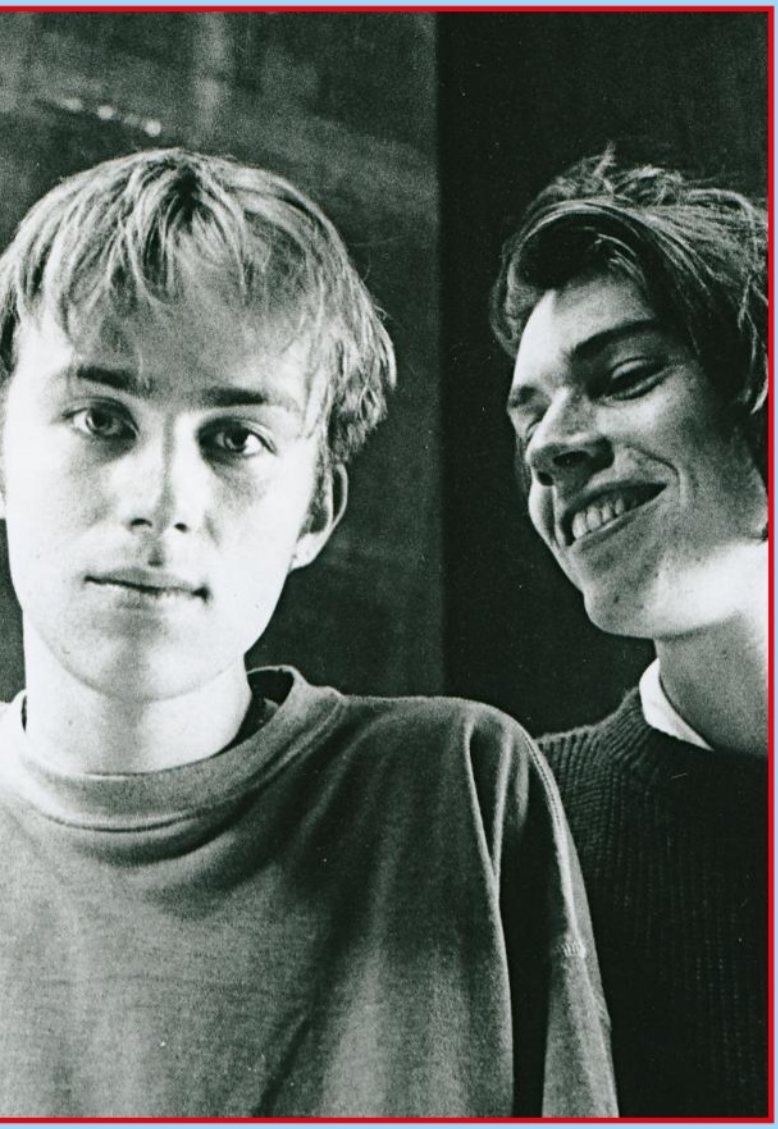
ARD BANDS..."



photos of what people thought of Colchester and everyone just brought in pictures of men digging holes. I took pictures of gravestones... it's death for young people, this place."

And Blur? They're the resurrection – which starts at opening time. The Blur drink is cider and Pernod in halves (Damon: "15 of these and I'm away"). Andy Ross from Food Records has come along to chaperone the band, which brings up the topic of the record company. Ross: "This lot, oh, they've sold out. But we're a cool label to sell out to."

Food, to their credit, don't so much dictate to bands as direct them – a gentle moulding effect. In Blur's case they've drawn out the more accessible points and focused their image. They look cutely rebellious now, compared to their secondhand clothes shop look before. Musically they fit snugly into what's happening at the moment.

"But we can't help that." says Damon shrugging his shoulders, "We're just one of those lucky bastard bands who've come out with the right record at the right time. All the material we started off with a year ago is suddenly 'in' now. Like 'She's So High' was the first song we ever wrote – and that hasn't changed at all. Obviously we've been given advice but we don't worry about it. If people want to perceive that we've been moulded, then OK, that's cool."

"We were very messy before," adds Graham. "But we're just learning what to do with ourselves, finding our identity. I mean it's quite obvious what we are now. A fucking groove band."

I'm playing devil's advocate here. "Yeah, but it's obvious that we're still going to look different to other bands," returns Damon lucidly, "because we've got something that draws people to us. There are fundamental reasons why people like bands. They're drawn to certain groups because they *want* them – whether it's emotional, sexual or intellectual, they *want* them. That's us."

Damon is a good frontman to have in a group. Despite looking dopey, he's like a less dictatorial version of Jesus Jones' Mike Edwards, talkative and volatile. On stage his theatrics include throwing himself off the PA and thrashing round like he's just plugged his hand into a light socket.

"To feel ill at the end of a gig, that's great. That's what I'd have liked to have achieved when I was acting but I couldn't because I was so conscious of myself. In a funny way you can get away with more in a band than you can when you're an actor."

Although in interviews he deteriorates into a mess of rambling quotes, his middle-class tearaway flaws are part of Blur's appeal. That chemical balance which critics say is always inherent in all good bands is in some way apparent in Blur – Graham acting as the foil to Damon's drunken garbage, Alex the soft–spoken Bournemouth outsider and Dave the quiet type.

"I used to get beaten up quite a lot when I lived round here," Damon admits, "but maybe I'm the sort of person who asks for it because I sound quite arrogant when I talk."

"I wouldn't say I was particularly volatile but... Oh, alright I am. I'm horribly cynical. I don't suffer fools gladly. Anything which I think is in the least bit foolish really irritates me. Like people who make a thing out of being weak and insecure, I hate that. But I'm a big fool anyway, so maybe I just hate myself."

"Wow," says Graham sarcastically. "Deep." "Aww, shut up." Got it? Blur's "destructive love song" 'She's So High', the most frustrated, pent-up moment of their live set, is released on Monday. Blur, with their unpredictable, vulnerable character and hybrid pop music will be on *TOTP* by next March. Latest. ■

THE FIRST SINGLE REVIEW

SHE'S SO HIGH (FOOD)

A bright, sharp shard added to pop's sticky kaleidoscope, Blur are four knowing bowl-heads from Col(man) chester. This is their first single and in its instant sugar-hit swirly riff, daydreamer vocals and incense wafts of backwardly winding effects it is definitely pukingly perfect. Blurfect. If some backwoods Simon Napier-Wham-Bell of the '90s had decided to put together a calculated post-Roses record with just the right pre-pubescent psychedelic feel it would sound like this, but a lot crapper. Plus it wouldn't include the *"She's so high/I want to crawl all over her"* chorus, which presumably refers to the topless lady climbing up a hippopotamus on the sleeve.

■ ROGER MORTON

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"You get to turn debauchin self-righte self-impor mons

With just their second single 'There's No Other Way', Blur had a Top 10 hit and became Proper Pop Stars. But were they teen-bait pretty boys, true crossover indie heroes or drunk scenesters over-celebrating themselves? Danny Kelly went to find out, saving lives on the way

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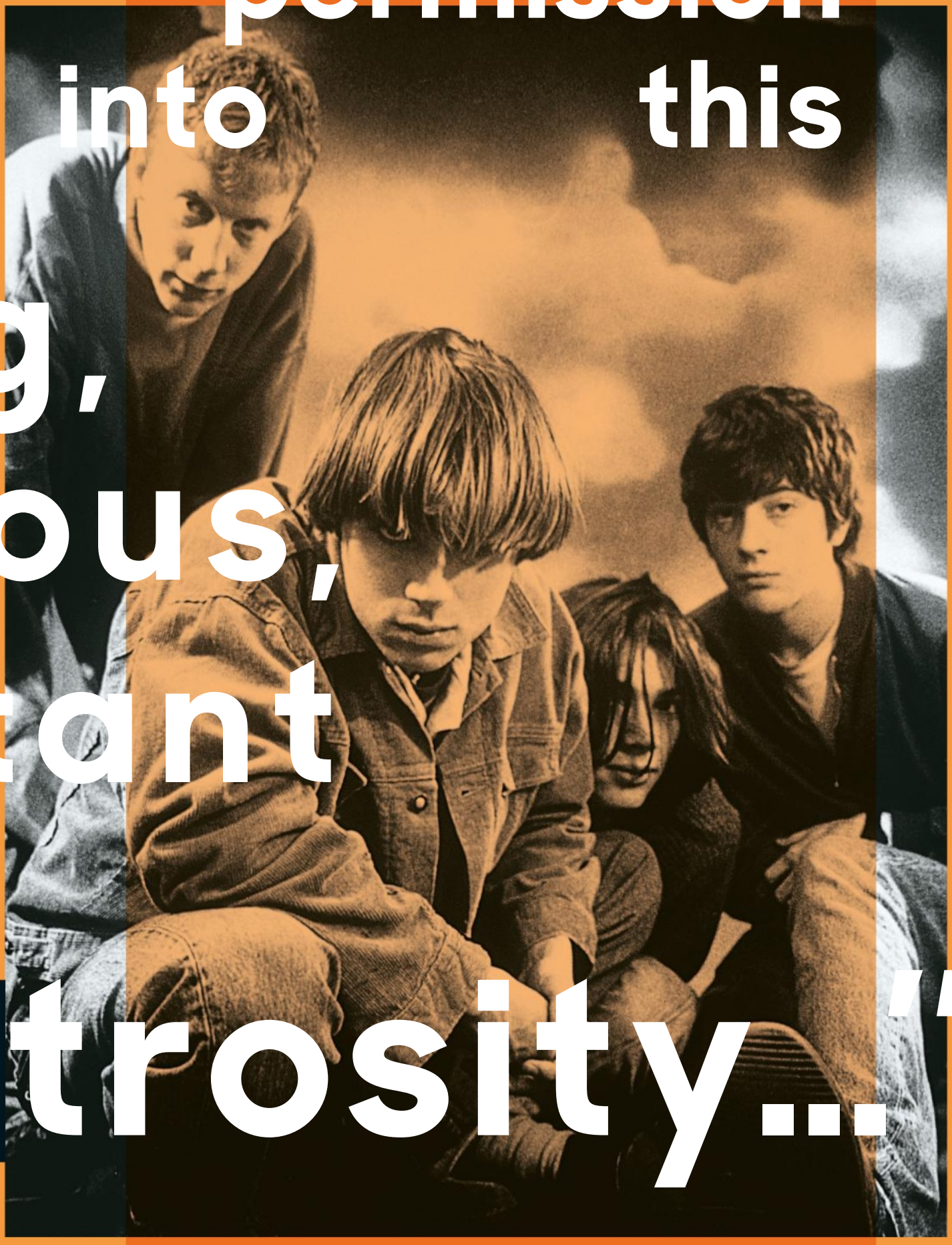

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So I admit it; I'm confused. One minute they weren't there; the next they were everywhere. They arrived in an, erm, blur...

The fact of Blur's elevation from hip tips to pop hits (and the nature of that elevation) made itself known to me in a series of linked events some time between their fine first single and the screening of their pretty excellent second, 'There's No Other Way' on Saturday morning kids' TV... Event one: I see this girl every morning at my local station. Fourteen or 15, she scrawls the names of the latest girlie-pop heroes on the side of her holdall. She's my barometer, and suddenly to the legends KYLIE, JASON, CHESNEY was added the word BLUR...

Event two: one Saturday night I pass An Incident in East London. The window of a record shop is smashed, glass all over the pavement, burglar alarm screaming. Two hundred yards away a police car corners two drunk lads in uniform sloppitops. They're the perpetrators, caught red-handed. All they've nicked is the huge cardboard window display featuring the bonny baby on 'There's No Other Way''s cover...

Event three (and I swear these are all true): on the hottest day of the year so far, I'm sardine-crammed into a townbound train with a million other panting souls. Suddenly the thirtysomething business type with the headphones beside me slumps, overcome by the lack of air. In best boy-scout style I engineer enough space to bend over and loosen his collar and tie. You could've knocked me down with Tim Charlatan's fringe! Beneath the crisply starched pin-stripe he was wearing a Blur T-shirt...

And within days of these almost biblical coincidences, there were the lads themselves, socking it to the nation on *Top Of The Pops*, proud fathers of that rarest of modern commodities: a genuine Top 10 hit that isn't either a reissue, a cover version, from a film about aliens or made by someone named after the starting handle of a computer.

So there's no disputing that Blur are, from a seemingly standing start, big. But it's a very complicated, curious strain of big: a fanbase comprising pop girls, rock lads, indie kids, ravers and insurance salesmen. It's the kind of big that allows them to appear sweating and grunting like Guns N' Roses on the cover of this week's *NME* while ensuring that next week they'll be pouting boyishly from the pages of *Knickerwetting News*.

I admit it; I'm confused. I have no real idea what Blur are. So here, just to set the scene for the band's own confessions, are some random speculations.

NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS
JULY 20, 1991

Blur are definitely part of the tide that has, for the last few years, ebbed and flowed between the once-forsaken wastes of indiedom and the national charts. The cycle (not unremarkably, given the influence of female consumption on it) seems to take about nine months. And The Mondays begat The Roses who begat The Charlatans who begat Blur...

They are also the, in every sense of the phrase, acceptable (pretty) face of a whole clump of bands (some straight rock, some a bit rave, most at some point in between) that have emerged since the Manchester thing started to run out of steam. Bands from the nowhere towns of the south and the Midlands, bands as keen on the chart as on cult status, bands like Moose, Five Thirty, Chapterhouse and Kingmaker, to name just the best.

Which brings us onto something else that Blur appear to be. Their music is the epitome of the pleasurably engulfing but dangerously bland and determinedly apolitical sound that seems to have evolved from the dance energy that immediately preceded it. Not exactly the blank generation, but hardly an electric pulse of life-affirming energy and ideas either. The great Lamacq calls this loose (how could it be otherwise?) alliance of shoegazers, ravers, fragglers and stragglers The Scene That Celebrates Itself. Blur are outspoken champions of that Scene, ie not very outspoken at all.

Blur are also teenypop pretty boys (especially singer Damon) to set the girlie pulses racing. This is one role they appear to fill with unease. A recent front-cover photo session went the whole hog, presenting them as the male equivalent of bimbo clothes-horses. Never again, they say, but how, when you're *Mizz* fodder, can you be sure?

Much, too, has been made of the fact that Blur are of a very specific age and generation, ie the one too young – at last! – to remember or let itself be bogged down by punk. Up to a point this is true, but surely all post-acid music has been liberated by the E-heads' insistence on reclaiming everything hippy, dippy and trippy, everything banned by the structures of punk. Besides, the generation gap gets smaller and smaller; Blur have got fans who not only don't remember punk, they don't remember the Stone bloody Roses!

And finally, Blur are part of that strange phenomenon that exists around the London music business. This allows the likes of Lush, Ride, the Neds, Pete Wylie (name your own) and even bands as big as The Wonder Stuff to gravitate to clubs like Syndrome to be faces, to be seen, to be big, big stars in a none-too-huge pond. Blur evidently enjoy all this and are making a bit of a name for themselves as gadabouts.

The combination of all these things, the fact that so many of Blur's constituencies interlock and overlap, is probably both the band's strength and ultimately their dilemma. It also provides grist aplenty for an interview that will hopefully reveal all...

So how does it feel to be a pop star?

Alex: "Well, it's nice work if you can get it, mate."

Damon: "I've never had any particular romantic image of what it would be like, so

Damon swings that baggy fringe, Freetown, Stoke on Trent, March 20, 1991

there's nothing to compare it to. Bits of it are better and bits of it are worse than I suppose our fans imagine. It is certainly not a disappointment."
Graham: "There are some really attractive things about it. Like meeting people. Your reasoning towards it all changes. First of all you're in a band purely to make music and then it comes to involve all sorts of things."

From the outside, you appear to be overnight sensations. Is that how it feels to you?
Damon: "Not at all. We've been doing this for years. I know we've only had two singles out but we have a history before that first single. And then the next one's a hit and suddenly you're an overnight star. We're not very articulate about the process of it all. It's a strange thing to put into words and explanations. There's always this feeling that it's too flimsy a thing to hold up to analysis. A strangely elusive thing. And you must remember that I've spent the last few years staring at these faces so it doesn't seem to me that suddenly we're major celebrities. Nothing's changed really."
Graham: "Eventually you can become amused by it. When you read things about you that are wildly untrue, you realise that is all part of the game."

Does it make you suspicious?
Damon: "We've always been suspicious. I certainly have. I've always been a bit critical and defensive. You certainly begin to notice things as your level of fame increases. Like, we've got so many mates. Suddenly we're going out every night and we're surrounded by mates."

"It's the idea of sedated subversion, an under-the-table subversion. And therein lies the state of modern life and culture. Thank you"
DAMON ALBARN

You are getting yourselves a bit of a reputation as socialites.
Dave: "I think 'liggers' is the word you're looking for."
Damon: "We've sort of got trapped by our reputation. Now it's become obligatory to write about us every time we go out and stress that side of us. It's the age-old problem. You're suddenly the objects of scrutiny. But we don't feel we've got to be on our best behaviour. Except in interviews. We're slowly learning the rules of interviews. The thing is, we haven't changed. It's the people around you and the way they react to you that changes. They adapt, they start to get more lenient towards you. You start to become more yourself, whatever that is."

Are you worried that you're becoming perceived as 'pop teen idols'?
Damon: "I think it's inevitable when you're in our position and you look like we do that you're going to get seen as teeny idols. It's not something we're keen to cultivate but what do we do?"
Alex: "It feels very nice to be flattered. We can't lie about that. It's a very pleasant feeling."
Damon: "It's very odd. We played at Ipswich recently and there we were, faced with a thousand 15-year-old girls screaming. Really screaming. Now that would lead you to believe that we were very much a particular kind of band. But then we can play the Town and Country Club and draw this completely different but equally enthusiastic crowd of older people, a mixed bag. And therein »→

lies the strength of this band, I think."
Graham: "We have a very diverse audience. That's pretty healthy. We attract different people in different ways. There's the people who've come to see us live or read about us. And there's the kids who know us through telly and the singles. I don't like to dismiss them as 15-year-old girls, 'cos it seems insulting. And then you take the fans along with you. They grow up with the band through the years."
Damon: "We're romantic enough to believe that we can have our cake and eat it. That we can appeal to everyone. Two years ago, I'd read interviews with bands and hear them say 'We want to distance ourselves from being seen in a particular way' and stuff and I'd think 'What a tosshead.' Now I feel exactly the same way."

Are you pinching yourselves yet?
Dave: "I find myself waking up in the morning, realising what's happening to me and just thinking 'This is fantastic.' I still haven't properly come to terms with it."
Damon: "Well, that's a typical drummer for you, isn't it? Always the humble one and very grateful for everything."
Graham: "What's the difference between a dead hedgehog in the road and a dead drummer in the road? There's skidmarks in front of the hedgehog."

You've just finished an album. Anything to say about that?
Damon: "I think an LP should reflect the state the band were in at that time. So that was a really strong motivation for me to make the record exactly that. A record of what Blur were about these six months. Whatever that is. And to resist the temptation to turn out 10 variations on the single."

What about the theory that your generation of bands have in common the fact that you're the first generation to grow up unaffected by punk and you can hear that?
Graham: "I think there's probably a lot of truth in that. I mean, we were aware of punk but very vaguely. We weren't aware of its relevance or anything. I'm more aware of that kind of ragbag of music that came after punk. Martha And The Muffins and The Police."

Were you the weird kids in school?
Graham: "Yes, but not as much as people assume. There's this idea that we were sort of arrogant weirdos who didn't fit in at all but that's not really true. Damo was a bit like that! I was just strange in that when all the kids were dressed in whatever, I wanted to wear cardigans and ties and Fred Perrys. Actually Damon was seriously weird! There's been a lot made of where we're from. This idea that coming from the sort of nothing place that we do has affected us. Well, it probably has. But it's not that important."
Damon: "What is important is that, well, that we are white, educated and western. In some ways that's supposed to be the pinnacle of civilisation. And yet this group of people are completely bereft of spirituality. Take the bands that we always get lumped in with, you know, that whole long list. Now I don't think musically we've got much in common with them... but I think there is

"The only music that interests me is music that completely takes me over. I want to be intoxicated. I don't want reserve or irony"

DAVE ROWNTREE

"'To Brett'? Why, I oughtta..." Signing copies of 'Leisure' for fans in Sheffield, 1991

PA, CAMERA PRESS/ED SIRRS

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some shared attitude. It's becoming really fashionable to seem out of it and everything. But there is something similar in a lot of these bands' outlooks. It's the idea of sedated subversion, an under-the-table subversion. You can say that these bands couldn't give a fuck but they can. Just in a strange sedated way. And therein lies the state of modern life and culture. Thank you." (*switches off NME's Dictaphone tape.*)

But it's apolitical music, isn't it? Purely sensual.

Alex: "Gratifying the senses. Of course. Oh wow, yes, man. We want the sound to warm our bones!"

Graham: "Silk trousers."

Dave: "The only music that interests me is music that completely takes me over. I want to be intoxicated. I don't want reserve or irony, just a sound I can get completely lost in."

Damon: "We want the music to be all-consuming and it seems a lot of bands today want the same thing. It's an intoxicating, all-consuming thing but there's something wrong. In your ear is the voice of doubt. People say that it's a scene that celebrates itself, or it's music about pop music. Well, that's an interesting thought. Hey, the meaning of meaning! That's what modern life is about. People learning about love from the television, kids learning to add up with computers."

Graham: "One thing always strikes me as complete nonsense. And that's the idea that people in groups are somehow elevated beings. We don't have any ideas that our fans don't have. When you wake up with a sore throat and greasy hair and feeling shit, you don't feel particularly elevated."

Damon: "It's like asking us, what do we stand for? What do we stand for? So we don't lie down all the time! But I completely understand people being fascinated or obsessive about us because music's done that to me. It's the greatest compliment someone can pay you."

Graham: "This is a cliché, I know, but I don't think there's any difference between us and the people who come and see us. (*Adopts Californian accent*) 'Hey, like the audience is the mirror for the performer in which yourself as a child is revealed.' One day we might love the idea of coming on stage with 100 dancers. But at the moment I think part of our appeal to people is we seem just like them. It's not a matter of them having Newcastle Brown while we have piña coladas. We have Newcastle Brown. We aren't gods. If I met myself in the street and took myself to listen to The Cocteau Twins, I'd probably think 'What a wanker.' We're fairly ordinary and not in the business of getting everything just right. But I do understand it when people become fanatical and obsessed. I know what it's like to need and have every record and book and press cutting on Syd Barrett and The Who or John Lennon."

Damon: "With all the attention and the indulgence, you have to be careful you don't turn into a monster. Because you get the permission to turn into this debauching, self-righteous, self-important monstrosity.

"There's a good one, you'll like this. In America, there's these two tower blocks facing each other and, quite by accident, one started to acquire a few exhibitionists. This was noticed, and on the other side a few voyeurs moved in. And eventually, the blocks filled up until one was completely full of voyeurs and the other full of exhibitionists. And I think that pop has developed like that. So now it's the industry completely populated with exhibitionists on one side and a whole industry of voyeurs has grown up on the other.

"I've got another analogy for you. The interview is like people standing on adjoining hills trying to shout to each other. And the wind and clouds obscure most of it. But every now and then the sky clears and the message gets through. But it's out of context and not what anyone meant."

And what's the most common of these inaccuracies about you?

Dave: "That we come from Colchester!"

So there you have it. Blur are ordinary blokes, enjoying their new-found status to the max. They're not even sure they deserve all the adulation that's coming their way, but they're not going to get hung up on it.

I admit it; I'm *still* confused, unsure what to make of Blur. I think they're slightly confused too. The difference is that they are confused and exceedingly effortless pop stars. Bang! ■

Live!

Octagon, Sheffield

OCTOBER 5, 1991

So Blur manage to smuggle several of their fans back to the hotel after the gig. And there are all these British Medical Association characters in dinner'n'dance outfits in the bar. And there's this rapidly emptying bottle of brandy being passed, relay-style, between band members. Graham Coxon is wandering around knocking glasses off tables and blathering on about being "a pawn in Blur's game". And singer Damon is seated at the grand piano jamming along to 'Summertime' while a 40-something they don't even know accompanies him smooch-style on the saxophone. And everything's turning hazy... In fact everything's becoming a bit, fat, fuzzy blur.

Blur know how to revel in excess until they're teetering on the edge of incomprehension. This is only the second date of a two-month tour (including a series of American shows) and if they carry on like this for much longer, they'll have to be carried on to the further stages.

Damon has been rambling on about Blur killing baggy. If 'The Stone Roses' started the whole shenanigan, then 'Leisure', Blur's debut LP, is the opposing book-end, the baggy bow-out designed to burn your flares to. Blur are turning into one bizarre machine; halfway through their set, after the fresh megaphone-aided blasts of 'Popscene' and 'Oily Waters' and a succession of crunching renditions of album tracks, your hack is starting to feel nauseous.

When Damon isn't the very epitome of distraction, he's clambering on Alex James' back and dancing as though being wrestled around the playground by an invisible school bully. Around the frontman's wild abandon, Blur play up to the most careless instincts, shrugging their way through a head-thumping 'Bang' and rattling past 'There's No Other Way' with intense aplomb.

Come the close of the set (with Damon, natch, stomping atop a wobbling speakerstack) Blur, not content with killing baggy, decide to give the corpse a good kicking by encoring with the laboured repetition of 'Sing', which takes their fucked-up pop manifesto out to the far limits of aural tolerance and leaves the crowd with pounding piano riffs bouncing around their cranial cavities. Harsh but cruel. ■ SIMON WILLIAMS

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Leisure

1991

Blur's debut is beholden to the flared-trouser fashions of the day, but between these baggy grooves, sublime sonic ambitions bloom

In 1990, every baggy swaggered. The dancefloor was ruled by the ape-like Madchester lollop, rubber-boned dancers moving slackly, jaws hung open in a dislocated drug stupor. In baggyworld, God was spelt B-E-Z and everyone frugged loosely to the rattle of his mighty maracas.

Except Blur. Blur didn't swagger. Blur *raged*. A trip to one of their gigs in 1991 was like a ticket to Bedlam. Damon took to every stage like a psychotic maniac unshackled, attacking PA systems, flailing into crowd and bandmate alike, literally climbing up the walls. Blur were a Tasmanian devil of a band, utterly at odds with the Manchester E-heads or the prevalent home counties trend for staring through your hair at your effects pedals while swaying slightly like a premonition of ketamine. As much as they assimilated its funky-drummer beats and wah-wah washes, they were a furious punk antidote to the baggy nation, a sexy mohican in a world of kinky afros, and their pre-album singles were pure revelation.

From its otherworldly broil of Coxon's guitar, like a sunrise over Valhalla, 'She's So High' sounded like the culmination of everything great about the contemporary music scene. The amorphous swirls of MBV and Ride merged with the languid Roses groove of 'Waterfall' and the arcing melodies of The La's to create a truly uplifting hallucinogenic romance built on the very basest desires: "*She's so high/ I want to crawl all over her*". Then 'There's No Other Way' arrived like baggy's grand encore, toting the sort of riff that bands like Happy Mondays were swiftly discovering came along once or twice in a career – propulsive shuffling drums, a backwards Beatles solo and a chorus that seemed to cut through the haze of that blankest of eras like a wake-up call from the termination squad. It hit Number Eight in the UK chart – and even if some were keen to paint Blur as bandwagon-chasers, there was something distinctly fresh and forward-thinking in this Colchester clatter.

When 'Leisure' finally appeared, it was a mild disappointment. Years later Damon would dismiss it as "awful", which seems a tad unfair on the poor wee mite, but with four producers helping the band try to concoct a sound and Damon writing the (admittedly largely meaningless) lyrics on the spot in the studio, it was an incoherent collection and one that totally failed to capture Blur's gob-thwacking live vitality. Tracks like 'Repetition' and 'High Cool' plodded rather than rampaged, signs that Blur might have been being sucked back into the baggy and shoegazing waters that they'd previously appeared to walk on. There were hints of early-'90s also-rans like Chapterhouse and Northside, where there should have been unimaginable new noises and game-changing ideas. The album's third single 'Bang' was knocked out in 15 minutes as a 'There's No Other Way' clone and, while remembered fondly by the faithful, has been disowned by the band and barely ever played live. Though 'Leisure' made Number Seven, there was much muttering about Blur having blown their big chance.

In fact, 'Leisure' was an essential rite of passage for the fledgling Blur. Without being disappointed by the lacklustre pace of the album, they may never have been inspired to fire up the oxyacetylene blast of 'Popscene'. And without having tasted the succulent juices of success, only to have them snatched from their craws and dripped down the svelte chests of Suede instead, they might never have been inspired to fight back with the near-perfect 'Modern Life...'. But 'Leisure' also had much sublime music to its name. In an era when most bands disguised their lack of tune by whacking up a quick sonic cathedral every five minutes or so, 'Leisure' wore its melody with pride. 'Birthday', 'Slow Down' and 'Come Together' were all spaced-out harmonies and gyroscope-eyed wonder hinting at the band's growing art-pop nous, and 'Sing' was the album's real masterstroke. A chiming, spectral piano, urgent bass and itchy drums drove Damon's nocturnal spoken-word drug ennui – "*I can't feel/Cause I'm numb/And what's the worth in all of this*" – towards a chorus of sunbeam-through-the-stormclouds glory. This, essentially, was Britpop's birthing pool and soon, what screams would come... ■ MARK BEAUMONT

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An essential rite of passage for the fledgling band

▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED May 1990-March 1991 **▶RELEASED** August 26, 1991 **▶LABEL** Food **▶PRODUCERS** Stephen Street, Steve Lovell, Steve Power, Mike Thorne, Blur **▶STUDIO** Maison Rouge, London **▶LENGTH** 50:13 **▶TRACKLISTING** ▶She's So High 10 ▶Bang 7 ▶Slow Down 8 ▶Repetition 6 ▶Bad Day 7 Sing 10 ▶There's No Other Way 9 ▶Fool 6 ▶Come Together 7 ▶High Cool 6 ▶Birthday 8 ▶Wear Me Down 7

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"If punk was about getting rid of hippies,

Welcome to A Hard Day's Night: The Next Generation. Blur are standing on the embankment of the A12, staring with disbelief at the steam billowing from a hired 1966 Jaguar which that has spluttered to a halt. They are on their way to Clacton, erstwhile '60s aggro-resort, where they plan to immerse themselves in the last vestiges of pre-Elvis England, cover the town in spray-paint reproductions of the title of their new album and then escape back to London.

The Jaguar is soon temporarily repaired, but by the time the group reach a nearby service station, the red Rover carrying Dave Rowntree, Alex James and Graham Coxon has also decided to expire. Blur are stranded 20 miles north of Chelmsford. And they have £50 to get them to their final destination.

NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS
APRIL 10, 1993

After repeated phonecalls, along comes a gold minibus driven by a genial figure who the band repeatedly refer to as "fat bloke". He says he'll allow them to complete their odyssey for £45. They agree, and soon Blur are haring down a dual carriageway, offering each other the expensive contents of four Fortnum & Mason hampers and looking forward to their imminent arrival in Clacton with a mixture of boyish glee and trepidation.

By tea-time that night, they will have sprayed the slogan 'Modern Life Is Rubbish' in the toilets of a public house and on the freshly-painted sea wall. They will have had their two hired cars brought by trailer to the end of the pier and indulged in a pictorial celebration of the style of '60s England. And by nightfall, Blur will have vaulted the barrier at Clacton railway station, laughing like children as they stow away on the last train to London.

What you have just read is not a draft idea for the next Blur video, the blurb on the back of a neo-surrealist paperback or the synopsis for a film. All this actually happened: sometimes life is like that.

This stranger-than-fiction seaside trip was intended to serve as a wayward explanation of some of the ideas behind 'Modern Life Is Rubbish', Blur's soon-to-come new album, and 'For Tomorrow', a stunning single that is sure to acquire a pivotal importance in the band's career.

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On a fateful trip to graffiti their new 'Modern Life Is Rubbish' manifesto across the seafront at Clacton, Blur explained the core ethos of what would one day become Britpop to John Harris. And very nearly got their heads kicked in...

I'm getting rid of GRUNGE"

It comes after eight months of backroom drama that began with the relative failure of the 'Popscene' single, took in ructions with the band's ex-management and near-bankruptcy, and saw Blur coming to terms with their innate notion of Englishness while they were cruelly put through three American tours. Were it not for all these difficulties , 'For Tomorrow' would probably have been released months ago – but Blur's timing has been fortuitously perfect.

Why? Because, as with baggies and shoegazers, loud, long-haired Americans have just found themselves condemned to the ignominious corner labelled "yesterday's thing". We're now getting in a lather about Suede and the less-lauded Auteurs, both of whom fit neatly into a lineage of clipped, sharp Anglo-pop. And now Blur – who once had a liking for a guitar sound that was influenced by Dinosaur Jr – have trailed an album unashamedly rooted in their home territory with a single that mixes up influences like Syd Barrett, David Bowie and The Move, and ends up sounding like a classic English record. It's instantly catchy, it's full of strange melodic twists, it retains a 'What on earth are they on about?' enigma, and it's got a wondrous "*la la la*" chorus. Make no mistake: it will be a hit. →

The troublesome Jaguar, tamed for now, Clacton seafront, 1993

Still, people are going to shout "OPPORTUNISTS!" and deride Blur as chancers who've stowed away on pop's latest lucrative bandwagon to save their ailing career. They're wrong. The Anglocentric ideas that infuse 'Modern Life Is Rubbish' were clearly evident on large parts of 'Leisure', their big-selling debut album. They became more focused on the punkified 'Popscene', and were revealed in full when Blur appeared at last year's Glastonbury Festival, at which Damon took to the stage in a sharp-cut '60s suit and premiered a Kinks-ish song called 'Sunday Sunday'. In addition, Blur have had to fight for their new ideals in the face of vocal hostility from their fashion-conscious record company – and that's never happened to The Soup Dragons, has it?

The story of Blur's time away from camera lenses and tape recorders, and the genesis of their new(ish) identity is articulately recounted by a solitary Damon, wedged into the back of the doomed Jaguar as it crawls through central London.

"We felt that 'Popscene' was a big departure; a very, very English record," he explains in clipped Home Counties tones. "But that annoyed a lot of people. We did the Rollercoaster tour (with My Bloody Valentine, Dinosaur Jr and the Mary Chain), and because fashion was completely myopic about America at the time, we felt that we were being mistreated. We knew it was good, we knew it was better than what we'd done before, but certain reviewers hated us for it. We put ourselves out on a limb to pursue this English ideal, and no-one was interested."

"We went to see the record company and said, 'In six months' time, you're going to be signing bands who sound English.' They were sceptical, but we persevered"

Damon Albarn

To make things yet more problematic, Blur were then shunted off to America to live the torturous life of the medium-league British band whose record company wants them to break the States. The experience, Damon recalls, was little short of nauseating.

"We had to go there for two months, out of which we had three days off. We did 44 dates, and each one seemed to involve getting off the bus and being greeted by a record company rep who'd put us in a big black car and drive us to shopping malls where we'd have to 'meet and greet', eat shit in a fast food store and then go to a radio station where they'd think we were from Manchester. Playing onstage was the only release we got from all the irritation, and we became completely exhausted."

In the midst of such nightmarish experiences, however, ideas for the new songs began to take root. Thousands of miles from home, Damon gradually stopped puzzling over vague ideas of Englishness (and sorry, Welsh and Scottish readers, but 'Englishness' is Damon's chosen term) and began to get a better grasp of the cultural milieu that had produced him and his band.

"I just started to miss really simple things," he explains, somewhat ruefully. "I missed people queuing up in shops. I missed people saying 'goodnight' on the BBC. I missed having at least 15 minutes between commercial breaks. And I missed people having respect for my geographical roots, because Americans don't care if you're from Inverness or Land's End. I missed everything about England, so I started writing songs which created an English atmosphere."

At this stage, it appears, Blur were groping towards adulthood; moving away from the wilful adolescent blankness that characterised their first album (Damon candidly confesses that most of the lyrics on 'Leisure' were made up in the studio) and gaining an increased sense of identity and cohesion. And then something awful happened.

"While we were in the States," Damon recalls, "we discovered that all the money we'd made on 'Leisure' – which wasn't millions, but quite a reasonable amount nonetheless – had 'disappeared'. We'd worked as hard as people like Ride and The Charlatans, but we hadn't seen anything. We literally had no money; we couldn't even pay our rent, and it got to the stage where it was touch and go whether we'd go bankrupt." Along with the band's apparent fall from critical favour, their temporary descent into empty-pocketed penury threw them into a familiar rock'n'roll rut: in the face of adversity, they began to drink a lot.

KEVIN CUMMINS

"You could see it in silly things like that 'Gimme Shelter' gig at the Town & Country. At that time we felt there was no way any journalist was going to give us a break if we played with someone like Suede. We had nothing to focus on – no new records, primarily – and we felt like massive underdogs. We just got really drunk and didn't play at all well. That was the point at which we realised we were becoming slightly schizophrenic; we weren't thinking straight.

"In addition to that, a lot of people around us were saying, 'Why are you trying to sound like this, why are you singing in such an English accent, why are you using brass bands, why aren't you rocking out a bit more?' Everyone was getting really nervous, because record companies follow fashion: it never occurs to them that they should set a precedent and back it.

"We were at an all-time low – and then we finally went to see the record company and said 'You've just got to let us do it.' I remember going to speak to them and saying, 'In six months' time, you're going to be signing bands who sound English, because it's going to be what everyone wants.' They were very sceptical, but we persevered. And it seems to have worked."

You've become an anti-grunge band, then.

"Well, that's good. If punk was about getting rid of hippies, then I'm getting rid of grunge. It's the same sort of feeling: people should smarten up, be a bit more energetic. They're walking around like hippies again – they're stooped, they've got greasy hair, there's no difference. Whether they like it or not, they're listening to Black Sabbath again. It irritates me."

The Jaguar has now sped through outer London, trailed by the aforementioned red Rover. Our chauffeur is a well-meaning upper-class chap who's been instructed by Damon to keep quiet – so we rarely converse with him, apart from the odd occasion when he seems to be on the verge of getting lost, and a crucial moment when Kevin Cummins politely suggests that he speeds up a bit. He then drives his teak-lined, vintage vehicle at 110mph, ensuring that the imminent breakdown occurs, and forcing Damon to shout over the sound of the car's vibrating chassis. By now, he's telling us about the difficult birth of 'Modern Life Is Rubbish'; about the abandoned sessions with XTC leader (and notorious Little Englander) Andy Partridge, whose studio demeanour was apparently akin to that of a strict headmaster, and the tribulations of using real orchestras instead of synths. Soon, he's explaining the feelings that lie behind the songs – some of which are markedly novelistic, a new turn for a lyricist who once boasted of the banality of Blur's songs.

"This album doesn't celebrate England," Damon muses. "A lot of it is triggered by things which are quite sinister, things that are tied up with the Americanisation of this country.

"When we were in America, this character followed me around – not as a physical presence, but in my head. He's called Colin Zeal, he lives in a new town in Essex, he's a modern retard, and he embodies a lot of what I'm talking about."

He's not our old friend Essex Man, is he?

"That might be one way of looking at him. He's got cable television, he goes to see the WWF wrestling... he's got his own song on the album, but he's in other songs as well. He represents this huge wave of sanitisation which is undoubtedly linked to America. When I was over there, I saw all these worrying aspects of English and British culture, where they originated and where they'd been taken 10 steps further. I'm talking about bubble culture: people feeling content in these huge domes that have one temperature and are filled with this lobotomised music. That's all happening here, and a lot of my feelings about it are on this album."

Which, if you remember, is entitled 'Modern Life Is Rubbish', an indication of Damon's belief in a lot of intertwined post-modern ideas that he himself had best explain. Ready?

"Modern life is the rubbish of the past," he claims. "We all live on the rubbish: it dictates our thoughts. And because it's all built up over such a long time, there's no necessity for originality anymore. There are so many old things to splice together in infinite permutations that there is absolutely no need to create anything new. I think that phrase is the most significant comment on popular culture since 'Anarchy In The UK'. That's why I want to graffiti it everywhere. I think it expresses everything."

It's now that your correspondent starts to feel as if he's parachuted onto the set of a '60s pop film. The cars break down; the minibus appears and, at 4pm, we tumble on to the pavements of Clacton – a sad, dilapidated town that's full of boarded-up hotels, half-empty amusement arcades and pubs full of the booze-dependent victims of seasonal unemployment.

The band, it appears, are half-drunk. Over pints of cloudy beer, we talk about Blur's love of skinhead-esque clothing (reflecting a love of the 2-Tone movement rather than a flirtation with right-wing imagery); about how Graham and Damon feel that their new songs are far more in line with the tastes they cultivated during their adolescences, and about Blur's sponsors at Food Records, whose every move is dogged by fashion-crazed expediency. Damon reckons Blur have "spiritually left" the label, going on to argue that Food should change their attitudes and stop being market-followers.

Twenty minutes later, the interview all but falls apart. Damon feels he's laid down the definitive party line, and isn't keen on being contradicted. Besides, the 'stop' button is pressed for the last time when he comes back to our table wearing an impish grin, after spraying 'Modern Life Is Rubbish' all over the walls of the gents' toilet.

The fun continues. The sea-wall gets similarly graffitied, we're forced to leave a sparsely populated fun pub when a group of thugs start mumbling about "those wankers in the corner", and by the time we jump the last train home the prospect of hordes of locals following up back to London to deliver violent retribution is becoming ever more likely.

It doesn't happen, of course. We leave the train at Liverpool Street station clutching souvenirs and looking splendidly fazed. It's been surreal, disaster-ridden and tinged with petty crime and threats of violence: Blur have taken us on the perfect English day trip. ■

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Modern L

▶THE DETAILS

▶ **RECORDED** October 1991-March 1993 ▶ **RELEASED** May 10, 1993 ▶ **LABEL** Food ▶ **PRODUCER** Stephen Street, John Smith, Steve Lovell ▶ **STUDIO** Maison Rouge/Matrix, London ▶ **LENGTH** 58:57 ▶ **TRACKLISTING** ▶For Tomorrow 10 ▶Advert 8 ▶Colin Zeal 8 ▶Pressure On Julian 8 ▶Star Shaped 9 ▶Blue Jeans 10 ▶Chemical World 10 ▶Sunday Sunday 9 ▶Oily Water 8 ▶Miss America 7 ▶Villa Rosie 9 ▶Coping 7 ▶Turn It Up 7 ▶Resigned 7

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ife Is Rubbish

Blur's brilliant second was a bolshy collision of yobbo attitude and tweedy tradition that thumbed its nose at grunge and swiveled a wry eye in the direction of our fair isle

1993

For a while there, it sounded like a rallying cry no-one was going to answer. "*Hey hey, come out too-naaaaght! POPSCENE!*" With its blazing horns and vein-pumping punk rush, 1992's stop-gap single 'Popscene' was flagrantly intended as a scene-starter, a call to arms for the anti-grunge brigade, the very first volley of the Britpop wars. And barely a man-jack of us took any notice. Blur's best single to date – if not of their entire career – stiffed at 32 and 'Popscene' wouldn't even make it onto the second album, so miffed were the band that their cause hadn't been taken up as the musical revolution they intended. Instead, through 1992 and into 1993, Blur's fledgling Britpop vision became a battle of attrition.

At the festivals of 1992, on bills full of baggies, crusties, grungers, shoegazers and acid casualties, Damon rampaged across the stages in a Bash Street-smart blazer-and-jeans combination bawling a quaint oompah-punk ode to traditional family Sundays. On the Rollercoaster tour alongside Jesus And Mary Chain, My Bloody Valentine and Dinosaur Jr, Blur were a screaming art-pop anomaly screening backwards films of the food production process from faeces to cow.

Nobbled 60 grand into debt and hoisted, drunk and squabbling, onto a 44-date US tour by their label, they were almost broken by the experience, retreating into a Kinksian bubble of warm Britannia nostalgia. And finally, back home and spurred on by the rise of their thunder-stealing Brutuses Suede, they became guerillas of Britishness, concocting images of dog-toting bovver boys and chintzy tea-drinking Brideshead toffs and scrawling the toilets of decrepit seaside towns with their new manifesto. 'Modern Life Is Rubbish': a culture built on detritus, recycled from the trash of history.

When it emerged, the album of the same name did its fair share of pilfering from the past. Its artworks were golden-rimmed images of wartime Britain – steam trains and spitfires; no accidental image as Blur set out to repel grunge from Britain's borders. Its lead single 'For Tomorrow' was drenched in music-hall trumpets, Beatledelic touches and 'Hunky Dory' string-und-strum. It was also, crucially, very wordy. 'Leisure' was smothered in largely meaningless pop hokum that Damon made up at the last minute, but this idyllic yet desperate tale of Jim and Susan adrift on the thin ice of London life marked his debut as social commentator with a keen eye for the ennui of post-Thatcher Britain.

And so this virtually immaculate album continued. The siren-strewn plink-plonk punk of 'Advert' highlighted our modern dependence on the comfort of advertising even as it harangued us to the brink of breakdown. The glorious rock bombast of 'Chemical World' emphasised the selfish spaces between us. 'Sunday Sunday' and 'Oily Water' – the most visceral and backward-looking track, all 'Loveless' swirls and coos – pin-pointed our national sloth, a country of grouchers, guzzlers and gamblers bingo-ing itself to sleep. And through it all lurched 'Colin Zeal', the album's central antihero, slickly navigating this shallow and poisonous landscape by blinkering himself from anything but punctuality, money and spray-tans: Thatcher's perfect, smarmy, self-seeking android.

'Modern Life...' wasn't all societal rubbish, mind. The effervescent 'Star Shaped' offered hope for a successful future, the blissfully stoned 'Blue Jeans' a sublime hug of empathy, and 'Villa Rosie' a hedonistic release. Combined, this wasn't just a major stylistic leap and a sharp-eyed dissection of the end of a century – it was Blur's best album and a pivotal landmark in pop culture. It wouldn't just be the next five years of chartbound guitar music that would spawn from its modish grooves. The Libertines and their many imitators fed deep from its East End regenerations and classical aesthetic, Kaiser Chiefs built a career on its acerbic "la-la-la"s and The Vaccines are pumped full of its punk pop bravado. 'Modern Life...' didn't just invent Britpop, it reinvented British pop. Full stop.

MARK BEAUMONT

10

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Profile on...

Damon

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In the midst of the 'Parklife' madness, NME profiled each member of Blur for a view into the eye of the Britpop storm. Here, Damon wrote his own revealing piece to give an insight into the thoughts of a pop person and prime mover of "the clever stupids"

I'm in a hotel in Magic America. There is a Strauss waltz piping through the hallway and someone is listening to the porn channel at full volume next door. What follows are a few obscure thoughts about pop people and about myself.

Thought 1

Pop people are defects.
Pop people are funny in the head and the more pop they get, the funnier their heads become.
Pop begins in bedrooms and ends up in supermarkets.

Thought 2

I ate myself. I am a pie. Elizabeth Wurtzel, author of *Prozac Nation*, described herself as, "A person who had no idea how to function within the boundaries of the normal, non-depressive world." Then she found Prozac.

Until last year, I had been someone who had never in their life felt even faintly depressed or suicidal. They were emotions that were as foreign to me as Japanese. Then out of the blue, just after 'Girls & Boys' came out, I woke up depressed. It was like the first day at primary school and a very bad hangover all at once. I found my whole upper body becoming incredibly tense. I had pains in my back and shoulder, panic attacks, and the only relief was to cry. I couldn't rationalise what on earth was going on in my head and I was pissed off with myself for being so weak. Things like this just didn't happen to people like me.

So I went to see a Harley Street doctor (the irony of

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this, I assure you, was not lost on me) who asked me whether I had been doing any drugs. I said a bit of cocaine, dope, quite a lot of drinking, nothing very out of the ordinary. The doctor, who I thought was a bit of a prat, took my blood pressure, looked in my eyes and said that cocaine had affected my nervous system.

The doctor slapped my wrist, gave me some anti-depressant pills and told me that it could take anything up to a year for me to feel completely normal again. I tried the pills for a couple of days but they did nothing for me other than make the world appear to be coming out of a transistor radio. It was no help at all, so I stopped taking them. As our workload increased, I began to feel worse and insomnia became another little demon in my head. I remember being at *Top Of The Pops* for the single 'To The End' and thinking, "I can't cope. Please, somebody switch me off." I tried a back man, a herbal man, and an acupuncture man, nothing really helped and everyone had a different reason why I felt the way I did.

To cut a few months short, I didn't go on to Prozac, take heroin or anything faintly cool or rock'n'roll. I did stop taking the small amounts of cocaine that I had done before (for people with bodies like mine, it's actually a really stupid and dangerous drug to take). I stopped drinking coffee, started playing football and going down the gym twice a week. I still drink a lot and smoke a bit of dope but generally I think I've learnt how to be a sane pop person (except at times like this when I've got jet lag and it's five in the morning).

I think my period of "otherness" was just part of a transition from one mode of living to another and not really proper depression (although there are strains of it in my family), and I don't mention it because I want to jump on the misery bandwagon. If anything, it is because I loathe the idea that pop people are in a position to hand out some kind of DIY guide to depression and suicide.

Yes, I have a very cynical perspective but pop people have pop emotions and they are not to be trusted. If Morrissey and happy Kurt gave you a run for your money, they are nothing on Courtney Love. She makes them seem bland. I've always thought her and Pamela Anderson should merge into one being: Pamela Love, the Tabloid Medusa.

I witnessed one of the more obscure products of this condition a few weeks ago, while on my way to rehearse with The Pretenders (first link being that Chrissie Hynde was once married to Jim Kerr) for an Unplugged thing, playing piano on a version of 'I Go To Sleep' (a song written by club member Ray Davies). As my cab drove up the road that the studio was in, I was distracted from my nauseous self-preoccupation by the sight of 10 youngish girls hanging around outside the entrance to a particularly nasty '80s riverside development. Later, I walk past the same building on my way for a quick drink. The girls have an alarmingly *Stepford Wives* manner. I ask one who they're waiting for and find out it is none other than Luke Goss, half member of scary '80s pop band Bros.

This has worried me slightly so I have a couple of drinks in the pub. Later, back at rehearsals, I find out from someone that they follow him everywhere and that it's a very organised operation involving portable phones and tip-offs from secret contacts in the know. "Don't you forget about me." They certainly haven't forgotten about Luke (the second link is that Luke is currently in a band who sounds a lot like Simple Minds). Are these people just plain bananas? Are the hordes of girls who wait, in vain usually, for a member of Take That to randomly appear at the arrivals exit at London Heathrow mad?

NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS
JUNE 17, 1995

My mum has a book on Indian holy men, known as the Sidhus, who in some cases spend up to 10 years in one place standing on one leg waiting for some form of enlightenment. Walking past those ageing Brosettes on that wet Tuesday afternoon, I thought of the holy men and how confusing the pursuit of immortality can get.

"Pop people have pop emotions and are not to be trusted"

Damon Albarn

Thought 3

In the '60s, people took acid to make the world weird.
Now the world is weird, people take Prozac to make it normal.

Thought 4

Pop people seem to be preoccupied with not being forgotten. They are all trying to join the Immortality Club. Some try kicking down the door and shouting, "Let me in! I'm for real, me!" Others go and give someone else's name on their application form. Some sneak in through the toilet window and a few go and kill themselves or get killed. "*Don't you forget about me*", was the popular stadium cry of Jim Kerr in the scary '80s rock band Simple Minds who have, unfortunately for them, been largely forgotten but who, in a peculiar way, feature in my next pop cul-de-sac.

Thought 5: a postcard

When I started writing this a couple of days ago back at home, I decided that the best place would be in the front room, looking out at the street. I see Alan Bennett every Sunday, on my way to football, writing in his front room. Mr Bennett has got blinds so that he can watch people without being watched.

I, on the other hand, am in full view in my fron t room. You might, at this point, be thinking what on Earth is he talking about? It is quarter to eight in the morning here and I haven't been to bed so I'm entitled to a little meander.

Anyhow, I couldn't think of anything to say so I went out for a drink. On my return, I found a postcard.

"Dear Damon, I had a great day in London. Went to Portobello and bought this card and some other stuff. When I popped the letter in, I saw you briefly (I wasn't spying) and you seemed a bit sad. Hope you are OK."

If you are reading this, writer of postcard, thank you for your concern. Yes, I am OK. And no, I was not sad, only in a mild state of panic over this piece. In fact, my frame of mind was reminiscent of the way I felt about homework on a Sunday evening when I could bring myself to miss *The Professionals*.

Thought 6: word count

One last thought. The last time I wrote something for a magazine, I did not have a computer. Now I have an Apple Mac. Before I had to count in my head how many words I had written which proved a very arduous task, On one such occasion, we were approaching Madrid airport on an Iberia flight from Barcelona, I had counted just over 500 words when our tour manager, who was sitting next to me, grabbed hold of my left leg. I said, "Fuck off Ifan, I'm counting my words," but he wouldn't let go so I hit him. I then looked at the other passengers and noticed they had the same look of complete panic on their faces as he did. I asked him what was wrong and he said, "We nearly died."

Apparently, the plane had approached the runway almost on its side with the left wing no more than six feet off the ground. Just before impact, the pilot had managed to right the plane so avoiding disaster and probably our death. For the rest of that day everyone got completely drunk and told all and sundry how much they loved them. I felt strangely distant as I had not shared the experience. Now I have a computer. Now I have word count in my life.

I have joined the clever stupids.

Dan Abnormal. Pop Person. 1995 ■

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"Maybe the to take

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now's time

Surfing the unpredictable thermals of youth, fame and booze, Blur are on cocky form, rejecting miserabilism and PC sex with the confidence of a band on top of the world. As they prepare the ebullient 'Parklife', Paul Moody feeds the dirty pigeons

over"

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Filming the 'Parklife' video with Phil Daniels, left

"Everyone goes on about the idea of the sentitive artist but for me that's bollocks"

DAMON ALBARN

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igh up above the glow of soft-porn peepshows and beetling black cabs, above the fluorescent record shops and the rush hour crush of Piccadilly, a red and blue neon screen flashes out its message over and over.

Freddie Mercury, Buddy Holly and Mick Jagger, forced to watch the skies forever from the upper balcony of the rock circus waxwork museum, stare up in silent homage. Hundreds of feet below, Damon Albarn's eyes are gleaming as bright as his solid-silver identity bracelet. 'See that? Next time we'll be up there with that lot!' And all the while, the message keeps flashing: 'LONDON LOVES BLUR... LONDON LOVES BLUR...'

Blur have gone around the bend. Quite literally. Rewind two days and the Colchester four are immersed in a studio bunker behind the British Museum. Deep within there is a mixing desk containing Blur's forthcoming 'difficult' third album. Damon (Puma trainers, cream Harrington, Bash Street haircut) swivels in a Mastermind chair, Alex adopts a slouch worthy of Dionysus, Graham stares into the middle distance. Drummer Dave goes to collect the sugary tea. Within five minutes, however, Damon is fending off imaginary brickbats. "The thing about this album is that in a lot of ways it's a massive departure," he says. "If people are scared of that, there's not much I can do about it. I just can't think of anything more boring than doing the same thing over and over again."

By changing so radically, maybe you'll just exchanging the fans you've got for new ones, à la 'Modern Life Is Rubbish'...

Damon momentarily affects the look of a 12-year-old who's just been told his birthday party's been cancelled. Alex, his mind miles away on a yacht in the Aegean, looks up from within the sofa and whispers his first words of the afternoon. "Maybe we will. Perhaps that's the tragedy of Blur..."

NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS
MARCH 5, 1994

What we're really discussing is 'Girls & Boys'. This is not your average single plucked from a forthcoming album. It's not even your average Blur single, if there is such a thing. It is simply bonkers. A biscuit-tin drum machine rattles out an intro, a synthesizer bleeps frantically behind it, and suddenly Damon's barking along in sexy robot-cockney about the carnal pleasures to be had on the holidays of club 18-dirty. It's Bill Wyman's 'Je Suis Un Rock Star' in bed with Devo, with the windows wide open and the sheets reeking of suntan oil.

"Yeah, it's about those sorts of holidays," enthuses Damon. "I went on holiday with Justine last summer to Magaluf and the place was just divided between cafes serving up English breakfasts and really tacky Essex nightclubs. There's a very strong sexuality about it. I love the whole idea of it, to be honest. I love herds. All these blokes and girls meeting at the watering hole and then just... copulating. There's no morality involved, I'm not saying it should or shouldn't happen. My mind's just getting more dirty. I can't help it.

"Pet Shop Boys have agreed to do a mix of it for us. I'm hoping they can come up with a version that becomes the big summer hit in all those nightclubs in Spain and Majorca. That's exactly what we want. I'd love those people to be into Blur." ⟶

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"I love herds. All these blokes and girls getting togther at the watering hole and... copulating"

DAMON ALBARN

'Girls & Boys' is Blur's most audacious record to date, by miles. If 'Leisure' was a meaningless but colourful flare of intent, and 'Modern Life...' a morse-code distress signal from a band in trouble, 'Girls & Boys' is a big flashing neon sign in Piccadilly Circus, spelling out the message that here is a group who will change and reorganise, strip down and dress up, anything they want to.

It's a three-album progression that's seen them crash land in the Top 20 (with wonderfully dumb chantalong 'There's No Other Way'), get washed up in a drunken haze ('Popscene' and its disastrous airing at *NME*'s Gimme Shelter benefit gig) and finally come back more together that ever. Blur licked their wounds in private, immune to the infighting that usually cripples bands on a downward spiral. Bizarrely, they suddenly find themselves as spiritual modfathers to the burgeoning new wave. Damon contemplates three years of being invited to parties he was never quite sure about.

"I genuinely don't know why we got roped into all those things. People say we've changed the way we look, but I was wearing a suit at Glastonbury two years ago, when the whole world had gone crusty. I'm not going to say we're ahead of our time or anything, though, maybe people just like us."

Damon spent the first 10 years of his life in Leytonstone doing "everything an East End kid does". He then decamped with his parents to Turkey for six months before his dad (former manager of late '60s psychedelicos Soft Machine) landed a job running the art college in Colchester. By 14 he'd enrolled at Stanway and become friendly with a quasi-mod in the year below who shared a fondness for Fred Perry.

Graham takes up the story. "We used to hang around the music block, mainly because that was where the lads never went. I suppose we were the school freaks in a way but we never had long hair, nothing like that." They got drunk together, made themselves sick smoking cigars in freezing-cold common rooms. They went on holiday to Romania with Graham's mum and dad and became initiated in the snog-laws of the early '80s eurodisco. They also fell so badly for Madness and The Jam that they'd never be able to love anyone else quite so much again.

Any latent yobbishness, however, was exorcised by a far more deadly peril: the art school years. On leaving school, Graham headed for a fine art course at Goldsmiths (where he was chanced upon in the bar one night by a French-studying Alex), and Damon flitted between drama school in Colchester and the Bohemia of the student bar. "To be honest I was torn between the two. All my life has been like that. One minute I'm in the East End, the next I'm transported to the outskirts of Colchester, which was practically rural. I used to come back from seeing Graham in London and then go to this club called the Embassy, a real soul boy place. I'm a mixed-up person. I've got this real Essex man vibe, I can't help it. Why else do you think I still wear things like this?" He rattles his solid silver bracelet.

Having moved to London, Damon spent two years messing around with the piano, composing rewrites of Kurt Weill's score for Brecht's Threepenny Opera. It was not a good time. "I used to go around and see him," explains Graham, "and he'd play me this weird stuff that was just endless piano, with no singing on it at all. It was just nuts." He then cashed in all his premium bonds and set about recording a decent demo tape, although at the time he believed that the future could only come in the form of a soul duo ("I don't want to talk about that"). Before long, however an arty clique of the highest order – it included situationist sculptor Damien Hirst, of chopped-up cow's fame – had been established.

Overnight, Blur became London's beautiful people. A mist covers Damon's eyes. "Lots of people mythologise their past, but we don't need to make anything up, I used to go to parties and whenever I got there, Graham would be lying on the ground like a human doormat. One night we went to a private view where all the drinks were free and got so rat-arsed that the only thing I can remember is waking up at 5 o'clock in the morning in a police cell at Holborn police station sitting next to a gurkha."

Alex: "I found myself walking in circles around a field in Kent, God knows how I got there." The greatest art student who never was pauses for effect. "We were young, good-looking, and in the best band in the world."

Such are the seeds of 'Parklife'. Blur's new opus takes in a far wider sweep of their teenage obsessions. Where a year ago they were a band at loggerheads with the music business (Damon: "We were totally, it was like war"), they now seem able to address the other things that make adolescence so wonderfully muddled. 'Girls & Boys' and 'London Loves' are a nod to summer holiday nightclubs, the barrow-boy odyssey 'Parklife' (narrated by Phil Daniels of *Quadrophenia* fame) a homage to their mod roots; and 'To The End', a swirling 'Je T'Aime'- style duet with Laetita from Stereolab, is draped in strings and a theatricality born during Damon's drama school years. It's all over the place. Clanging mod sing-alongs, instrumentals, and rampant art-school foppery. None of which will make their reputation as intellectual tearaways any easier to live down...

Damon's eyes light up. "Well. That's exactly what we're trying to achieve. For me the album is a loosely-linked concept involving all these different stories. It's the travels of the mystical lager-eater, seeing what's going on it the world and commenting on it. It's the same idea as the poem (Book actually – Drug Lit Ed) *Confessions Of An Opium Eater*, but that sounds much too sensitive. Everyone goes on about the idea of the sensitive artist, but for me that's all bollocks. I can't stand the idea of being a sad, lonely bedsit poet. I'd much rather be perceived as loud and arrogant. Our sensitivity's in our records."

Damon mentally scans the assembled faces of the entertainment industry for an example. "Take someone like Daniel Day-Lewis. I hate cunts like that, the bane of my life, these people who think they're tortured. They always need someone else to make them good. Where would Morrissey be without Johnny Marr? He's a lager-eater!"

For Damon, the lager-eater is not a creature from the moribund depths of pub culture but a character who can move in any circle; from Highbury to high art, William Hill to William Blake. In full flow, Damon suddenly veers off to discuss how people perceive sexuality: "It's like all this stuff about new age sexuality, how politically correct it all is. Rubbish. The way people think about sex isn't remotely PC.

KEVIN CUMMINS, CAMERA PRESS/PAUL POSTLE

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Dave and Alex finally see their name in lights, London, 1994

Live!

Alexandra Palace,
OCTOBER 7, 1994

"We are the mods! We are the mods! We are, we are..."

Steady on 'old' chaps. If pop culture is society's reflection, man, right now Britain is standing in a hall of comedy mirrors and we're all looking very odd indeed. We are the bloomin' mods. A cry not heard round here since small-town everywhere 1979. And it's back! And this time it's cool. Because this time they've got Britain's favourite boing-pop maestros for inspiration.

With bingo being compered from the stage by some bloke shouting "quack quack" in bingo-ese, and ice-cream ladies with trays-in-harness mingling in the crowd, we're on the pier-end, Brighton, 1957 and it's all gone totally nuts. The crushed-velvet curtain swishes open to Blur's stage dangle of giant pink lampshades and one gets to thinking the whole thing is a bewildering celebration of my mum.

Pogo apoplexy unites the now-burgeoning crowd with a soaring 'Tracy Jacks', a jubilant 'Popscene' and back in the canyon-sized wilderness a barnyard dancing competition breaks out. 'To The End' is perfection and two indie girls who've been acting out every single word all night have now lost it completely in dying-swan ballerina action. A quick, unremarkable new one – 'Mr Robinson's Quango' – sees several parkas sit down on strike until the big moment. Uncle Phil. And this, Damon tells us, is "the last time ever" Phil Daniels will appear on stage for 'Parklife'.

Christ! The end of an era! Pop history, mate! "Unless," adds Damon, knowingly, "we do it in cabaret." Last-time sentiments force mods upon other mods' shoulders before they fall off to a delirious 'Girls & Boys'; a terrace-chant from Damon of "lets awl 'ave a disco!"; a swoonerous 'This Is A Low', before 'Jubilee' rocks the place asunder to a '77 pile-up and we're left with feedback yowling into outer space, thinking, 'They did it! They pulled it off!'

"Pop history?" balks Graham Coxon at the champagne-free, Skol-stuffed after-show do. "Er. Sort. Of. Aaaaaaaaargh!" and actually runs away.

■ SYLVIA PATTERSON

"I use London as a metaphor for almost every situation I'm in," he continues. "I can't help it. When we were recording 'Modern Life...', *Generation X* by Douglas Coupland was a big influence, but for the new one it was *London Fields* by Martin Amis. I couldn't get over how much I loved that book, it had so many levels. London's like something you fall in love with. It's when it gives you the clap that you really find out how much it means to you." Graham stirs. "I never think of London as one specific person. There's so many different elements to it. It's not one girlfriend, it's 20."

A chorus of groans emerge when it is suggested that a love of London invariably equates with a disdainful view of America. "What it all boils down to is that the people who buy our records couldn't care less about what America thinks," says Damon. "Why does everybody else have to worry so much? What we want to do is cultivate that chemical inside you that gives you belief in things. When we brought out 'Modern Life...' it was different, we were on the defensive. Now we've broken through those preconceptions we can really start. I always said to people, don't judge us, wait until five years from now, but maybe now's the time to take over. Theres just so much stuff to get out... erm, what's that expression...?"

Alex shouts, "ANAL EXPULSIVE!"

Damon practically bursts with glee. "Yeah, that's what we are. Anal expulsive!" ■

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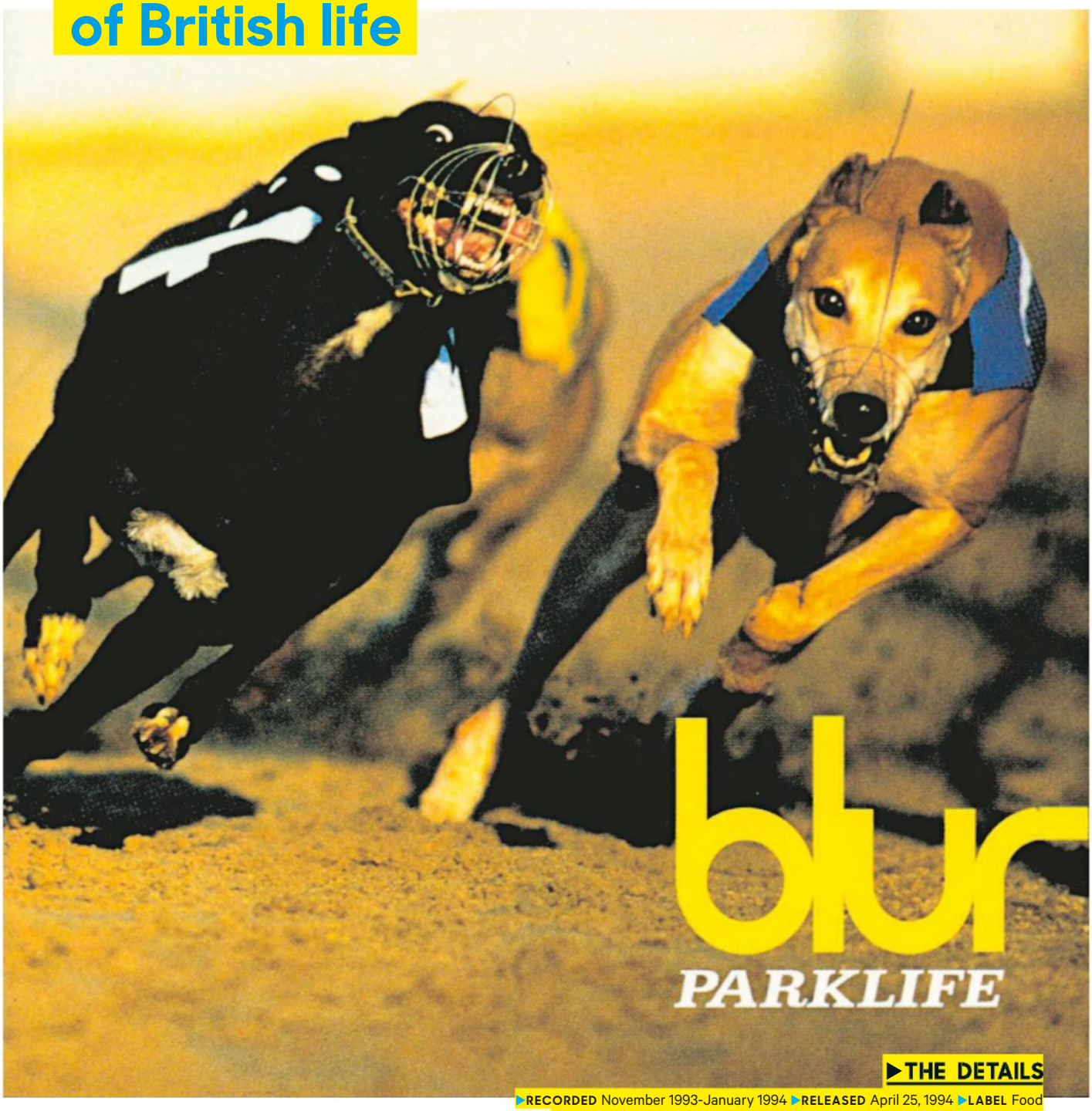
An album about the coarse and greasy minutiae of British life



▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED November 1993-January 1994 **▶RELEASED** April 25, 1994 **▶LABEL** Food **▶PRODUCER** Stephen Street **▶STUDIO** Maison Rouge, London **▶LENGTH** 52:39

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Parklife

2003

Blur might have gone to the dogs, but their music was reaching new heights. All life comes out to play on Britpop's crown jewel, and its lust, loutishness and longing endeared them to the masses

True to its title track's chorus, bellowed boozily by a gangly-limbed young Damon Albarn, Blur's 'Parklife' really was an album for "*all the people, so many people*" – not just for the cockneys, but a broad cross section of a new cosmopolitan Britain. It's the reason why, of Britpop's two biggest heavyweights, Blur have aged the better. While Oasis were throwing around moody, muscular guitar riffs and staring out at you from your television screen like they wanted to gob on your grandmother, Blur were writing songs like the jolly keyboard bounce 'Girls & Boys', a song that soaked in the hedonistic juices of a new-found British liberalism. As the UK loosened its attitudes towards homosexuality – up until 1994, it was still illegal in parts of Britain – here were a band describing "*girls who are boys who like boys to be girls*" and arguing, in a tongue-in-cheek way, that anything goes, so long as it's with "*someone you really love*." "It's quite a universal message really, isn't it?" laughed the Colchester lad turned Londoner.

Universal sounds about right. Club 18-30-going lusty teens; lager-swilling geezers; hum-drum office workers; wheeler-dealer dads and despairing mums; middle-aged cross-dressers (guitarist Graham Coxon drew one in the album's liner notes) – 'Parklife' served them all, with Albarn establishing himself as the nation's new everyman, getting under the gritty, often mundane surface of pre-Blair Britain to a backdrop of scratchy guitar jangles and winking brass. It's an album about the coarse and greasy minutiae of British life. "*Grandma has got new dentures/To eat the crust on pizza,*" he barks on 'Bank Holiday', its frantic speed so perfectly encapsulating the blink-and-you-miss-it nature of a three-day weekend. Even the album's sleeve, a shot of Walthamstow dog track, is a British working class institution – much like the other image they considering using for the sleeve, a betting shop window, a place of everyday folk looking for brief escape from the numb greyscale of 20th-century existence. Modern life, it seemed – despite revived fortunes – still felt rubbish.

'Parklife' saw the frontman sharpen the vision he'd laid out a year earlier on that redefining second album. His lyrics, though rooted in the dourness of day-to-day London life, bore a moving poignancy and sophistication this time around. "Damon was getting into a really good stream lyrically and we were all kind of inspired," recalls Coxon. "It was an album we all really enjoyed making." You could tell when you listened – its laddy, lager-charged rebellion was contagious. Lead-off single 'Girls & Boys', in particular, caught the national ear, bolting into the Top Five like a greyhound from the traps. Even Thom Yorke, unthinkably, was drawn in, confessing he wished Radiohead had written the song, while a Pet Shop Boys B-side remix was seen as a passing of the UK pop torch. What was to follow though, as Oasis and Blur's rivalry captured a swagger also seen in British fashion, art and bolshy New Labour politics, had a more seismic impact than anything Neil Tennant's band managed. Cool Britannia was reborn.

As important as 'Parklife' is as an insight into '90s England, it's also a brilliant snapshot of a band in evolution: from pantomime cockney instrumental 'The Debt Collector' to crunchy punk-meets-sci-fi jam 'Jubilee', the album is more daring with every track. 'Far Out', sung by Alex James, mines '60s psychedelia, opening with eerie whistles and bongo drums before erupting in twisted carnival synths. 'Clover Over Dover', meanwhile found Albarn contemplating suicide over medieval-sounding keys ("*If I jump it's all over...*"). The melancholy slow pan of 'This Is A Low' offered moving tribute to the serene calm of Radio 4's Shipping Forecast, but 'End Of A Century' was to be the album's anthem – a stirring, undeniable baroque pop moment foaming at the mouth with low-rent and melancholy. "*Ants in the carpet, dirty little monsters,*" sang Albarn over Sgt Pepper orchestration and collossal Kinks hooks. As the genre-inspiring culmination of Britpop and a defining moment in '90s music, 20 years on the lure of 'Parklife' – his own dirty little monster – has barely dimmed.

■ AL HORNER

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Profile on... Graham

© JULIAN OPIE

In his natural '90s habitat, Camden's Good Mixer pub, Coxo talked drinking dens, being anti-football, older women and being "at complete odds with everything"

People don't meet in The Good Mixer any more. Oh darling, the scene's just so decayed now. We'll be in the Engine Room or the Lock Tavern, more Chalk Farm than Camden when you think about it. Actually darling, Camden's finished – oh didn't they tell you? Look, come down to Soho, the French House, then we can sign you into the Groucho. No honestly, you'll love a bit of it...

As Graham Coxon helpfully points out, "The Mixer ain't the Groucho... Why do you have to go into some exclusive,

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celebrity-ridden place to have a good time? I don't want to be snorting coke and drinking champagne with them cunts. I wanna be talking with my friends, just actually trying to get things steadied, 'cos things can go off the rails so easily."

To which the obvious response is you don't have to go there if you don't want to. Here, it's tempting to discern a conflict in emphasis – at the very least – between the shy, uptight Graham and the garrulous, swaggering Damon. Wan, neurotic chain-smoker versus strapping, super-confident bon viveur.

Put the notion to Graham and he'll demur, but only to an extent.

"Damon's a nervous chap a lot of the time, by no means strong. I know he's much more aggressive than the rest of us, wanting to prove himself in certain ways. But," he sighs, "the thing is, if he wants to go on about football and Page Three girls that means we all get associated with it, 'cos none of us have every really said we hate football or we hate anything to do with Page Three girls. I hate football and I hate anything to do with Page Three girls. But people always wanna hear Damon's opinion.

"At the moment Blur are funny people because we can make good music together but god knows what might happen if we tried to make music individually. It'd be shit. Apart from maybe Damon, who can always write good songs."

Which, as history amply demonstrates, is the definition of all the truly great bands, as well as helping to explain why none of the truly great bands can, or should, last forever.

"Yeah, definitely," nods Graham, as from the Mixer juke Wilson Pickett signals his intent to tarry until the midnight hour. "Alex is always trying to make sexy sounds with his bass and wiggling his hips, and I'm always tugging at the other end trying to make the most noise I can. But the middle ground of that makes for good listening.

"Damon's writing good songs. Dave drums, and is a samplermongous computer whizz-kid. We'll never not be friends because of the musical differences. But the only thing is, I don't want Blur to become some fucking football band. And I don't want it to become 'John Taylor was seen getting wrecked in Stringfellows with a load of white powder up his nose'. And I *don't* want it to be 'Drummer Found Dead In Plane Wreckage'. And I don't want it to be 'Guitarist Goes To Live At His Mother's And Has Gone A Bit Funny'. Because that," he chuckles, "in the classic Spinal Tap tradition, is the way we're going. None of the members of Blur is as simple as I've just said, but in the caricature of the four of us as Blur, that's what it seems like."

It's worth saying that for someone whose reputation for moodiness, even instability, precedes him like a vast therapist's couch, Graham Coxon remains thoroughly agreeable and relaxed through what seems, at certain points, like a much-needed process of steam-venting. We might be tempted to diagnose a serious battle for the soul of Blur, were it not for the fact that Graham is susceptible to bouts of angst and uncertainty in the first place.

"People have gotta understand that I'm at complete odds with everything," he says, a little pleadingly as our sixth pints begin to curdle with a vengeance. "I don't really know what's going on. Everyone's going, 'Well done, Graham' and I don't even know how I feel about anything yet. People are constantly asking me and it's difficult to tell 'em. My life is a mass of confusion. This is the intermediary time and we have to seem to know what we're going on about and I feel I'm letting Damon down in a lot of ways, because I really don't know."

It's dark outside. The last Pedigree and Kronenbourg slip away, and the Mixer's juke lies dormant. The pool table remains a temple of intrigue, but Graham is anxious to get on and meet friends and talk some more, this time about different things: "Obviously no-one would buy *NME* if people in bands were talking about the sort of things they talk to their friends about!"

NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS
SEPTEMBER 23, 1995

But what's left? In the course of two hours we've slain conversational dragons by the score. The films of Quentin Tarantino, especially *Reservoir Dogs* and *True Romance* – "one of the loveliest films", opines Graham – are important because "they show that violent deaths are fucking scary, and I do have a huge phobia about dying violently". Graham's parents were quite happy for their young son to watch violence on TV but not sex. In spite of this, in his first year at comprehensive school Graham went out with a fourth-year girl.

"It was a little scary, because she'd get impatient with me to kiss her and I couldn't handle it and I'd run off and watch *Grange Hill* instead. But that's normal. A first-year boy going out with a fourth-year girl isn't!"

Sex, violence... what else? Smoking. Right. Both Graham's parents smoke but his sister, a nurse, is violently opposed. Graham is thinking of getting hypnotised to help him give up.

"I'm a natural smoker but I don't think I should be and I've always wanted to be hypnotised. Damon was saying there's a dog on the loose that can hypnotise people! If it can stop me smoking I'm gonna search for it. It'd probably be cheap, give him a few tins of Pal and you're away!"

And then there's his current love affair with selected scrapings from the US underground, the combination of hearing Wipers while touring American last year and his "distrust of the Britpop thing". Gradually, Graham became aware of a conundrum: "I don't know anyone from the groups that don't particularly grab me. If I go out and watch Pulp I'll smile but it'll be a familiar smile – they're people I know and like but they're never gonna set me alight. I hate saying that, 'cos I hate to let them down..."

So that's that. What else can we possibly talk about? He doesn't like football, after all. Does Graham like any sport?

"I like... curling. I recently got this excellent ice bucket, which was orange at the bottom and black at the top and shaped like a curling stone. Football was my first love, along with music; I just have no need for it now. I hate the proving-yourself thing about it. I don't wanna be a good fuckin' centre-forward, or a good defender. I definitely don't wanna be a good goalkeeper. I'd much rather be a referee!" he laughs, "saying 'Foul! Foul! Foul!'"

Ha! Ha! Ha! Graham Coxon woke up this morning "feeling spasms of upset". Something tells me we're into something good. ■ KEITH CAMERON

"If we tried to make music individually, it'd be shit"
Graham Coxon

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"Oasis are very nice boys..."

Back from the brink and back on top, Blur's 'Parklife' tour was the most celebratory of their career so far, complete with mass singalongs, buried hatchets and actual against-the-stage shagging. Steve Sutherland climbed aboard and covered his eyes

NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS
JUNE 25, 1994

It could have been the cider. It could have been the song. It could have been the fact that this was just about the only place they could be together without her brother or his mother walking in on them. Whatever, when Blur went into 'To The End', he came over all romantic and one thing led to another, a hand held, a clasp undone and, before either of them knew quite what they were doing, they were at it, screwing down at the front, standing against the stage, oblivious to those around them, lost in the lights and the passion and the music. And each other.

Graham thought he had seen them but couldn't believe his eyes. Two 15-year-olds, one a punky schoolgirl screamer, one a flash nouveau mod. Humping in the hall? Nah! Surely not. But Alex saw them all right, seated back on his amp, stroking the bass. "It was beautiful," he says backstage between gulps of bubbly. "Just beautiful..."

This is Aylesbury Civic Centre, the last night of the 'Parklife' tour, Blur's final British date before they headline the NME Stage at Glastonbury. And shagging down the front is a perfect finale for what's been going on for the past few weeks.

Damon, who's stretched out exhausted on a sofa clutching a big 'I love you' sign that he bought at a truck stop, has been through six pairs of shoes on this tour, torn from him when he dives into the crowd. More than once he has asked the crowd to return them, claiming he's not Jesus and can't go barefoot. But the crowd never believe him. "J-E-S-U-S", they chant back at him and, he admits with a grin, it's as close as he's felt to immortality.

There's sweat running down the walls in small rivers but, for some unfathomable reason, Graham has changed into full army combat fatigues, tin helmet and all, and is screaming "INCOMING!" whenever anyone approaches. Dave is very quiet in the opposite corner, drinking soft drinks, avoiding the booze which Alex, manfully, has taken upon himself to consume singlehandedly. Slugging from his second bottle of champagne ("One can't drink champers from a plastic cup now, can one?"), he explains how he arrived home after the Shepherd's Bush gig the other night and settled into a serious brandy session unaware, until his girlfriend came home, that the flat had been burgled.

"There was a keyboard missing and... some other stuff," he slurs good-naturedly, "I hadn't noticed. But I couldn't bring myself to care. I never give beggars money in the street or anything so, y'know, fair's fair..."

He saunters off in search of a disco. Damon pulls some sodden betting slips from his top pocket. "People have been throwing them onstage," he grins. "And, since the album came out, we've heard that some owner has named his dog Parklife!"

CAMERA PRESS/STEVE DOUBLE

"That's nothing," says Graham, snapping momentarily back into our world. "On the Japanese version of our 'Parklife' CD, the dog's eyes light up and when you open it... it BARKS!"

There's a commotion at the door and a bunch of fans are let in for autographs. One wants her arm signed, one's been to every show on the tour...

"Here goes my big mouth again but... the reason we're doing so well is because, at this particular moment in time, I don't think that there's another band that have qualified what they're about as much as we have," says Damon, signing away. "We've come to a point where've really met our market full-on. I know it'll change but, right now, it's all ours. When we started, I really wanted to be a part of something, but we're out on our own now." He laughs at his own arrogance.

"Untouchable."

It wasn't always this way, and that's what makes tonight – and other recent nights of Blur's triumphant 'Parklife' tour – all the sweeter. Not so long ago, it was pretty nearly curtains for Blur. They were perpetually drunk, disillusioned, becoming crap and scared half to death of what was happening to them. They played the Hibernian Club in London to less than 400 people – all that was left when the party fell flat after the bright pop promise of 'She's So High' and 'There's No Other Way'. They had management problems and faced financial ruin. They'd reached the point of collapse, fruitlessly touring America and, to top it all, their record company became convinced their future lay in becoming an ersatz Jesus Jones.

Blur's reaction was to hit the bottle with a vengeance, getting too pissed to care. It all came to a head in the winter of 1992 at The Town & Country Club (now The Forum) in north London. Blur were headlining an *NME* charity bash and they were absolutely rubbish. Damon came onstage and told the crowd they may as well go home because the gig was going to be crap, and then spent much of the set headbutting the speakers. He also inadvertently managed to stab a mic stand into the head of one of the security guys and the band fled the premises fearing for their lives.

On top of everything else, there was another band further down the bill who, suddenly, everyone fell in love with.

"Yeah, Suede," reminisces Damon, still wincing at the memory. "We just went into self-destruct. There was this general sense that we were redundant and, naturally, we couldn't handle it."

Damon was woken the morning after the gig by Dave Balfe, founder of Food and one time member of The Teardrop Explodes. Over beans on toast he informed Damon that, as far as he could see, Blur were all over. He'd seen it all before with the Teardrops – the over-indulgence, the bad attitude – and he gave the band a month. In short, he told Damon that he'd blown it.

"We don't like people stealing our thunder! We tend to think that we've earned a right to a certain amount. And we're very affronted when we're ignored"
Graham Coxon

"That was totally rock bottom," remembers Damon. "All we had left was a studio in Fulham. But, when you've got nothing to lose, you sometimes come out with your best material."

"Our pride was bashed," recalls Graham, "and we decided that it wasn't good for us mentally to be in that anxious, paranoid state. Part of it was like driving a car and wanting to crash it so the responsibility of driving isn't there anymore."

So Blur holed up in Fulham, eased off the alcohol and started to plot their future.

"The fact that Suede were doing so well really helped," admits Graham. "I remember when we came back from America and suddenly Suede were everywhere and we were crap. That was weird. I went down to the Underworld and no-one wanted to talk to me. I was yesterday's guitar man. And it mattered! We don't like people stealing our thunder! We tend to think that we've earned a right to a certain amount. And we're very affronted when we're ignored."

So Blur determined to regain their territory, their focus sharpened by adversity.

"I'm pretty brutal," admits Damon. "I don't fear aggression. Obviously, I don't wanna get my 'ead kicked in, but I don't mind arguing. Y'know, some people, it affects their whole being when they're in confrontation, but I'm not like that. I enjoy a good barney."

So began a war of words in the papers between Blur and any other band who dared to release records that sold more than theirs (which was just about everyone around the time that 'Popscene' stiffed). Suede became a special target because they were the darlings of the press, Brits nominees, Brats winners and recipients of the Mercury Prize whilst Blur were out on their uppers. Not only that but Damon's girlfriend, Justine, soon to form Elastica, was Brett's ex. So this was business and personal.

"Hmmm. Look, I don't wanna talk about the Suede thing because I've exorcised all my little hang-ups," says Damon, picking his words carefully. "I imposed them on myself and they were probably unnecessary but it helped them in the first place and it sure helped us. But now I think it's quits. I mean, we're pretty similar really. I object to some of the things I've seen that I've said. Y'know, I'm very negative and it's unnecessary sometimes."

But is the rancour really over? As recently as the June issue of French magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, Graham accuses Suede's Bernard Butler of ripping off his guitar style: "Why? Because Mr Butler was Blur's guitar roadie for two years... he spent hours crying on my doorstep for us to take him on tour."

Damon, meanwhile, is quoted as saying, "This is the first time we've spoken about this, because we didn't want to come across as vindictive cunts. We wanted to wait until we were at the top to reveal these stories. If we'd said all this two years ago, no-one →

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would have believed us. I knew that my moment for vengeance would come. Public vengeance and personal vengeance. I wanted to prove to myself that I could dethrone Brett and his group of cretins. We'll see who's at the top of the charts in two or three years."

Blur's reaction, when *NME* confronted the band with these quotes at the time of publication, was a vague denial that they had ever said such things. And, to be perfectly fair, the journalist who did the interview can no longer find the Dictaphone tape to substantiate the story.

Damon squirms when he's asked about it now.

"That's not... that's not... that's not true, y'know. Thank god it didn't go any further. I've learned my lesson from that. I will not say another thing ever again."

Are you saying you didn't say it?

"Oh, I didn't say it in the context anyway."

Long pause.

"For the record, I think Suede are a very important band but they've got to go through similar things to what we've been through. It hurts when you see yourself ignored and other people taken notice of."

"Those quotes were taken extremely ridiculously out of context," says Alex coolly. "I don't want to waste my time talking about that. It didn't ring true. Maybe 18 months ago, the four of us, drunk, talking about it one night. But not now, not while we're Number Five in the charts."

So you can be far more magnanimous now Blur are successful.

He smiles. "Absolutely."

The upturn in Blur's fortunes came when they recorded 'Modern Life Is Rubbish', an LP which effectively reinvented them. Ignoring record company pressures, they cut loose from the post-baggy loser scene and reappeared as sharp, sophisticated, streetwise lads about town. All the bitterness and disappointment of the previous year had been used to fuel a fierce determination not only to stay together and succeed as a band, but also to enjoy the craic as it was happening. And suddenly it had all paid off. Blur actually became the band that Damon had always said they were going to be.

"It's important that Oasis are rude about everybody and that they get drunk. That's what people want, and you encourage them. Fair enough"

Damon Albarn

It happened at Reading festival. Blur were playing the second stage tent on a cold Saturday night while, on the main stage, The The were boring the bollocks off a freezing crowd. Gradually, as if by some pre-arranged signal, people turned their backs and started heading for the tent, where Blur found themselves the hit of the whole weekend.

"That was amazing," recalls Damon, beaming at the memory. "It was the first time that I was ever in control of my performance. It was a lovely feeling having the whole audience singing along. And I suddenly realised what we were, I discovered the key – that sort of call and response reaction, that eclectic quality of gathering lots of different kinds of people together. We played Norwich the other night and there were 15-18 year-olds at the front and, at the back, there were men with beards – and great beards at that! All singing. That's the way I've always seen it. I wasn't particularly into the rebellion thing when I was a teenager. I didn't read *NME* and get into all that oneupmanship. I've always thought that music is there for everybody."

The 'Parklife' tour is much like attending a post-cup final knees-up. Everybody supports the same team. Everyone sings along. Before the band comes on, there are even renditions of the Kinks' 'Sunny Afternoon', Small Faces' 'Lazy Sunday', the soundtrack to *Oliver!* and, ulp, *Bruce Forsyth's Generation Game*. Yeah, hang that DJ!

Damon's right, no-one can touch Blur right now. One guy I know reckons the Friday Blur gig at Shepherd's Bush might be the best he's seen since the Clash at The Music Machine. Totally punk rock, he reckons. Gutted he didn't go the night before. Can't stand the album though, just got off on the charge of the crowd, swooning along with 'To The End', breaking into the mass pogo for 'Tracy Jacks', going completely moshpit mental to 'Parklife' itself. This is pure celebration, the likes of which we haven't experienced since those heady days when Primal Scream toured 'Screamadelica'.

Damon saw the Scream on that tour and, although he doesn't have much time for drug mythology, he sees how the chemistry works.

"I can appreciate that we generate a similar feel but I just don't share the same vision. We did all our drugs before we were in this band," he laughs.

Damon has been quoted as saying that Bobby Gillespie should quit while he's ahead and open a Rolling Stones museum. Reminded of this, he smirks. "Yeah, well it's important we all hate each other, isn't it?"

There are tales of a run-in with Oasis too. It seems that, after *NME*'s Undrugged Question & Answer session at King's Reach Tower, the Oasis lot ended up at The Good Mixer pub in Camden where they happened upon Graham and harangued him mercilessly until they were thrown out.

Some say that Blur – inventors of New Lad when they dressed as mods and sprayed that wall in Clacton with 'Modern Life is Rubbish' for last year's *NME* photo session – were a little lacking in bottle when faced down by the real thing in the shape of the feuding Gallagher brothers. Damon laughs. He won't be responsible, he says, for legitimising a generation of thinking hooligans.

"It's important that Oasis are rude about everybody and that they get drunk. That's what people like you want, and you encourage them. Fair enough. It's nice, isn't it? But it's nothing to do with me. They came to see us in Manchester and they were very pleasant boys. Very nice."

He's grinning.

"I'd like to see that as a quote. 'Oasis are very nice boys.'"

Damon is aware, though, of how careful he must be not to allow any image to get out of hand. Harmless old Madness are still plagued to this day by thick bastard skinheads and Blur have refused offers to play scooter rallies or to appear on the cover of a scooter magazine for fear of the wrong associations.

"We're very aware not to unleash the nasty elements," he says, "though, personally, I think I'm too camp to attract those people anyway. There's always a chance with Blur that we'll appear in a video dressed as raving fruits or schoolboys or whatever. There's no guarantee that it's gonna be just Fred Perrys and giving it what the lads want.

"But let's face it, we all play up to what people expect of us. The trick is to realise that and to tell yourself that there's gonna be a cut-off point and you're gonna go on to do something else. Because the world will change anyway. That's the exciting thing for me. That's the motivation for being in a band – the fact that it's always moving. You constantly have to be on your toes."

Damon sheepishly likens himself to David Bowie in that, although he may not always be able to stay one step ahead of the

STEVE DOUBLE

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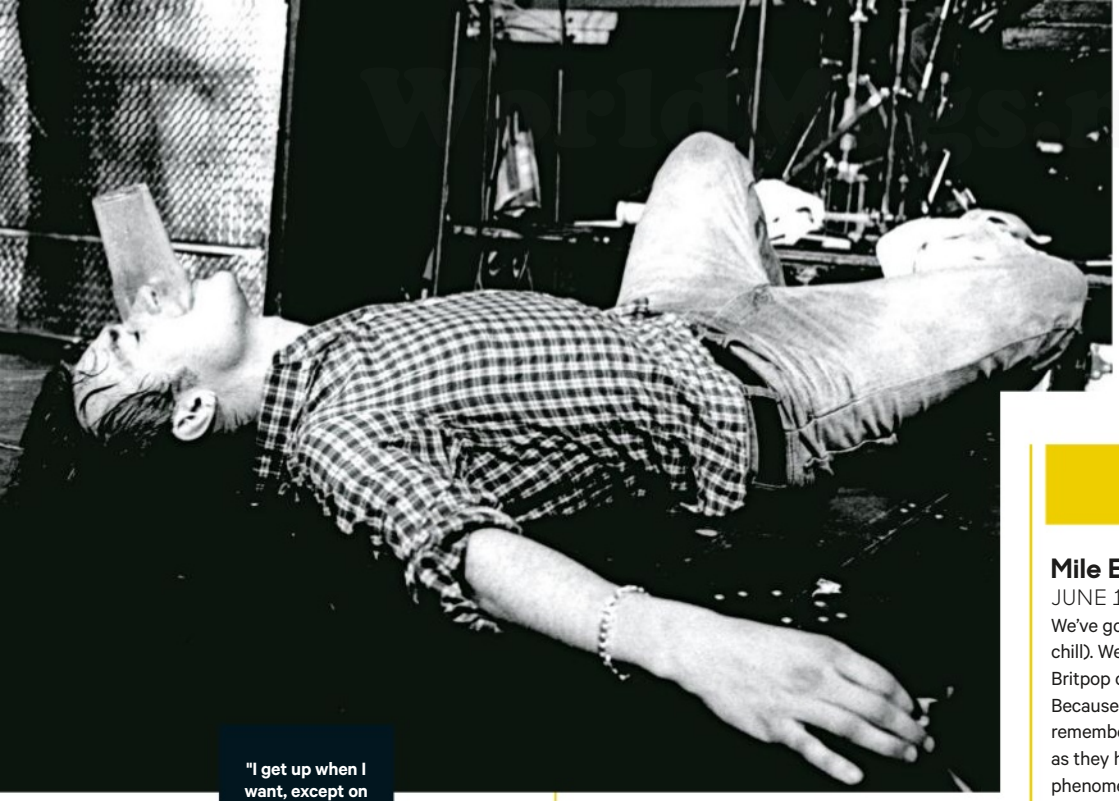

"I get up when I want, except on tour days." Damon catches some Zs onstage

pack the way Bowie did in the '70s, at least he thinks about it. 'Parklife' entered the charts at Number One, knocking Pink Floyd off the top, and showed they were making headway towards reaching the listeners his heroes reach. In Damon's view, people like Prince, who are neither rock nor pop but simply great songwriters, touch people's lives irrespective of creed or colour. And that, he says, is what he hankers after.

He can see the purpose in all the Sensers and Fun-Da-Mentals, he understands their impetus to exist, but he is constantly disappointed that their music isn't populist, that it's too content to reach no further than the converted. Damon's role model for the perfect pop star is Jerry Dammers, who managed to infiltrate the charts with his anti-racist anthems and political fury embodied within songs everyone could sing.

"The Specials were a high point of British pop culture and it's something I really aspire to create again," he says. "Still, that whole British thing we went on about... I think there are better bands in Britain now than there have been for a long time. So it's working and I really think it's gonna work in America."

America?! After all they've said about not giving a monkey's toss about making it there!

"OK, it doesn't really matter but, at the same time, it's quite scary when you get reports that 'Girls & Boys' is getting played 70 times a week on KROQ. I think it's important for a couple of British bands to go over there and do it completely on their own terms. My biggest hang-up with America is that it's one-sided. They sell their culture wholesale, McDonalds-style to the rest of the world, and are not interested in anyone else.

"The British bands that have done well in America are the ones that have compromised themselves. Like Radiohead. That's not a criticism. I'm just saying that's the way they did it. But you don't last in America like that. There's not one British band who were prepared to play the game the American way that have gone back and been accepted by an American audience a second time around."

Graham says he refuses to go back until Blur have sold half a million records in America. Last time, he says, all the insincere gladhanding and compensatory drinking put him in a rest home on his return.

It's this refusal to work for the Yankee dollar that led to Phil Daniels – the actor Blur have often publicly admired for his role in The Who's *Quadrophenia* – performing 'Parklife' on the album. While his contemporaries Tim Roth and Gary Oldman relocated to Los Angeles to seek their fortunes, Daniels remained in London and, according to Blur, stayed true to his roots.

"It was one of the biggest thrills of my life when he performed with us at Shepherd's Bush," says Damon. Daniels arrived in a car straight from appearing in *Carousel* in the West End, and launched into the song hunch-backed and manic, like he was playing Richard III. Damon was scared.

"I didn't know what he was going to do. In the rehearsal, he changed the words to '*Damon's got a brewer's droop*' so god knows what he was gonna say." As it turned out, Daniels restricted himself to a tirade against Man United (both he and Blur are Chelsea supporters) and the mutual appreciation society reconvenes at Glastonbury.

"That will be the greatest night," says Damon. "I can't wait. 100,000 people, all singing along to 'Parklife' will be..."

He shrugs, genuinely lost for words.

Considering Blur's aggressive campaign against America's cultural colonialism, and their constant griping about the successful invasion of grunge which triggered all those daft reports about the death of British pop, were Blur affected by Kurt Cobain's suicide?

Damon nods: "It was very strange. I'd just been through a month of working ridiculously hard during which I went through 12 countries in 10 days and I was suffering from nervous exhaustion.

"It was horrible because, at the same time that I was on the front covers looking the ironic, chirpy Englishman, there were all these other covers with these harrowing pictures of this beautiful man who was the same age as me who killed himself.

"It was 'orrible. And then Ayrton Senna died. There was a real air of..." He laughs self-consciously, "End of the century. Y'know, everything blowing up."■

Live!

Mile End Stadium, London

JUNE 17, 1995

We've got the weather (torrential rain, January chill). We've got the bands (the cream of the current Britpop crop). We'll call it Modstock, shall we? Because thousands of hardy schoolkids are going to remember this day for the rest of their lives. And just as they have recast Blur from indie also-rans to pop phenomenon, they transform what could have been a common-or-garden pop concert into gen-u-ine zeitgeist-shaping, generation-defining EVENT. Spike Island for teenyboppers. Two years ago, Blur were a cause célèbre in *NME*. Now it's clear they have the same status in the nation's classrooms, playgrounds and sixth-form common rooms. Bar Damon's baffling entry in blonde wig and fake pot belly, the set is about as surprising as another government sex scandal, but it's only right they should use tonight, the apex of their career, to go straight for the pop jugular. The likes of 'She's So High' and 'Popscene', ignored/reviled in what now seem like past lifetimes, are greeted like prodigal son(g)s, while Blur's previous declaration that Ally Pally would host Phil Daniels' final rendition of 'Parklife' is exposed as a lie. The new songs on view establish 'Parklife' as no fluke. 'Globe Alone' is 'Bank Holiday' on very nasty drugs indeed, while 'Stereotypes' out-Elasticas Elastica in robotic electro-rock weirdness. And then there's 'Country House'. Introduced as being "about neurotic pop stars", it contains a possible Oasis reference ("*Morning glory, that's a different story*"), flaunts a chorus more infectious than the Ebola virus and brandishes official papers stamped "sure-fire future hit single". It is indisputably great. Proceedings end with a gorgeous, purple version of 'This Is A Low'. That intricate beauty, laddish bravado and loony tunes should be crammed together so seamlessly is testament to why you should fall for them too. Lock, Modstock and roll out the barrel...

■ MARK SUTHERLAND

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Ooh-Blur missus!

THE SO

The 'Gimme Shelter' fiasco

Teetering on the edge of rock'n'roll's abyss – their singles flopping, their label threatening to drop them, their support act Suede nabbing all of their thunder – Blur decided to warm up for their headline set at *NME*'s 'Gimme Shelter' charity show at the Town & Country Club in Kentish Town (now The Forum) on July 23 1992 by hitting the pub from early afternoon and rolling onstage as hammered as Mötley Crüe roadies. "You might as well go home now, this might well be the worst gig you've ever seen," Damon told the crowd before spending a significant proportion of the set rolling on the floor and trying to push the PA offstage, presumably to prevent anyone hearing the sonic equivalent of soiling yourself in public. Total punk rock, obviously, but Food gave them a month to clean up their act afterwards, or they were out on their arses.

The Aids 'joke'

In a September 1995 *Observer* interview, Noel Gallagher said of Blur: "The guitarist I've got a lot of time for. The drummer I've never met, I hear he's a nice guy. The bass player and the singer, I hope the pair of them catch AIDS and die because I fucking hate them two." In the '90s, AIDS was even less LOL-worthy than it is now, and outrage ensued. A week later, Noel publicly apologised in the *Melody Maker*, saying he'd been asked over and over to give his opinion on Blur, and never dreamed the journalist would run with the bad-taste throwaway quip he'd immediately retracted. "Anyone who knows me will confirm that I've always been sympathetic with the plight of HIV carriers and Aids sufferers," he protested, "as well as being supportive of the challenge to raise awareness about Aids and HIV."

Damon, however, took the comment to heart and the two bands' feud simmered on for years. A tentative thawing could be seen in Camp Gallagher when in 2006 Noel recounted to Xfm how he'd been stitched up, adding, "but, there you go. I obviously don't wish that... A bad cold I should have said. Flu maybe?" The duo subsequently kissed and made up in 2013 with an onstage collaboration at a Teenage Cancer Trust gig, much to Liam Gallagher's disgust – little brother promptly tweeted "Don't know what's worse RKID sipping Champagne with a war criminal or them backing vocals you've just done for BLUE! LGx ."

The sexy hippo

The playful pop art image that graced the cover of Blur's debut single 'She's So High', based around a painting by Californian artist Mel Ramos, fell foul of the ideological rigour of early-'90s student unions, who decided they must be sexist, reactionary pigs. In Liverpool Uni the band were picketed, while in Coventry it was declared that anyone wearing the image on a T-shirt would be thrown out of the student union's bar. At Warwick, a rival table with anti-Blur, anti-sexism leaflets was set up opposite the band's merch stand. "It wasn't conceived to annoy," protested Alex James. "Tits with a hippopotamus just looked new. But we were going 'Fucking great... we're in the press!"

They'd reappear in the outrage pages around the release of 'Modern Life Is Rubbish' after releasing two press shots entitled 'British Image 1' and 'British Image 2', featuring the band in skinhead and mod attire with a large mastiff and taking part in a camp tea party respectively. At the time, indulging in such nationalistic, nostalgic imagery marked you out as a Little Englander and just possibly a racist Nazi, although the 2-Tone loving band were appalled by such readings.

High on British TV

Just before the band appeared on *Top Of The Pops* to play insanely catchy baggy hit 'There's No Other Way', Food's Dave Balfe decided to loosen the band up by slipping them all an ecstasy tablet, lending their doe-eye stare a somewhat unusual intensity for the watching families. Damon recounted that his pill kicked in as he was watching the preceding act, Vic

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CANDALS

Boobs! Bolly! Barnets! On the road to national treasuredom, Blur haven't been shy of disgracing themselves

Reeves doing 'Born Free', which should have been a psychedelically terrifying experience. "He was doing this big crooner thing," he recalled. 'Suddenly all this glitter fell from the ceiling and Alex and I were at the side of the stage just looking at each other going, "Yeah, this is it. Come on!" It was a beautiful moment.' Beautiful it may have been, but when Albarn spoke about it at Reading 1999, he soon came under fire from the father of Leah Betts, the teenager who died after taking the drug.

The Blur/Blair connection

Long before Noel Gallagher's 1997 meet-and-greet at 10 Downing Street, Damon Albarn's Blair-positive noises in the press were noted by a press officer for Labour party deputy leader John Prescott. A meeting was delicately mooted, though it was rumoured in the press at the time that Tony was trying to avoid the band, even going so far as to avoid the Brits for fear of association with them. The reason? 'Blur' was also the nickname pinned on Blair by the Tories for his political slipperiness, and he reportedly feared a Britpop photo opp could backfire on him (the official reason given for his Brits no-show was "a heavy cold"). So, Albarn headed over to Westminster to regale Prescott with tales of Blur's new stage set and its giant hamburgers. Later on they were joined by Tony Blair and Alastair Campbell for a cosy chat and gin and tonics. While Alex James later claimed that Damon came back raving about how cool Prescott was, Albarn himself sought to play the hobnob down in a 1999 interview, claiming that "Emotionally there was very little connection. I just felt troubled." Not so troubled that he didn't subsequently take Prescott's press officer to London members' club Soho House and then on to Stringfellows for champagne, and then later still, take Alex James to the House Of Commons bar to get pissed with Mo Mowlam on whisky.

Suede (dis) harmony

Blur's rivalry with Oasis is well-documented elsewhere in these pages, but their early antipathy with Suede was much more deep-rooted. In fact, it was *personal*. Justine Frischmann and Suede's Brett Anderson had met at University College London and fallen in love, but by the end of their architecture courses, with domestic bliss looming, Justine bailed out and shacked up instead with one Damon Albarn (despite the fact that on their first encounter, when Suede supported Blur in 1990, he'd responded to her request for a Blur poster with "fucking buy it, then"). Anderson moved out of Justine's Kensington flat, paid for by her father. She later claimed it was the making of him: "It wasn't until all the ugliness happened and I ran off with Damon that he got enough of a demon in him, a reason to get his own back on the world. He was quite a stable, happy person when we were together – probably too blissfully happy for his own good."

It's fair to say Anderson held a grudge; he wrote the vicious, baleful 'Animal Nitrate' about Albarn. Things would intensify when the bands also became professional rivals. Suede's rapid rise to fame in 1992 made Blur look rather old hat, and at *NME*'s Gimme Shelter charity gig, they knocked a drunk, wavering Blur into a cockney hat. Damon became obsessed with his rivals, telling a French mag in 1994: "I knew that my moment for vengeance would come. Public vengeance and personal vengeance. I wanted to prove to myself that I could dethrone Brett and his group of cretins."

To this day, there's been no reconciliation. When prodded as to his thoughts on Damon in 2010, Brett replied rather icily, "Well, we don't have a relationship to talk about. We all have things that happened years ago, rivalries and so on, and people assume that they're still on your radar. It's like some musical soap opera, often one that's been fabricated, without much substance. I have different issues in my life now."

Alex's mega champers bender

As if to stop himself going down in history as the musician who was banned from Milton Keynes for throwing his guitar into the crowd and knocking someone from Newport Pagnell unconscious, Alex James quickly took to superhuman drinking. "I spent a million pounds on champagne in three years," he wrote in *The Observer* in 2002. "Drank two bottles every day except Wednesday and gave a couple away. It's something like 0.1 per cent of the entire country's champagne turnover for a year." His antics made him a Soho legend, doyen of members club and all-night drunk-making establishments. "I realised I'd been in the karaoke bar for a fortnight," he wrote. "I was getting pretty good at 'Dude (Looks Like A Lady)'." ■

DAMON'S HAIR

Now now, stop tittering. The stigma attached to hair-loss solutions does discredit to us all. Wayne Rooney, Gordon Ramsay, James Nesbitt – all the cool kids are doing it. And there's been rumour that former baggy moptop Damon Albarn has joined their newly bushy ranks. In 2003, Damon jokily claimed to the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the British press "say that I'm fat and I'm bald." When the interviewer responded, "Wait, you have hair..." Damon quipped "Well, it's a wig. I've had all the flab digitally removed. In reality, I am actually something out of *Heart Of Darkness*."

But we should still stress that there is absolutely no actual proof that Damon's had his once-visibly thinning, now bristling barnet plugged in. Nope.

ANDY WILLSHER, LFI, DEAN CHALKLEY

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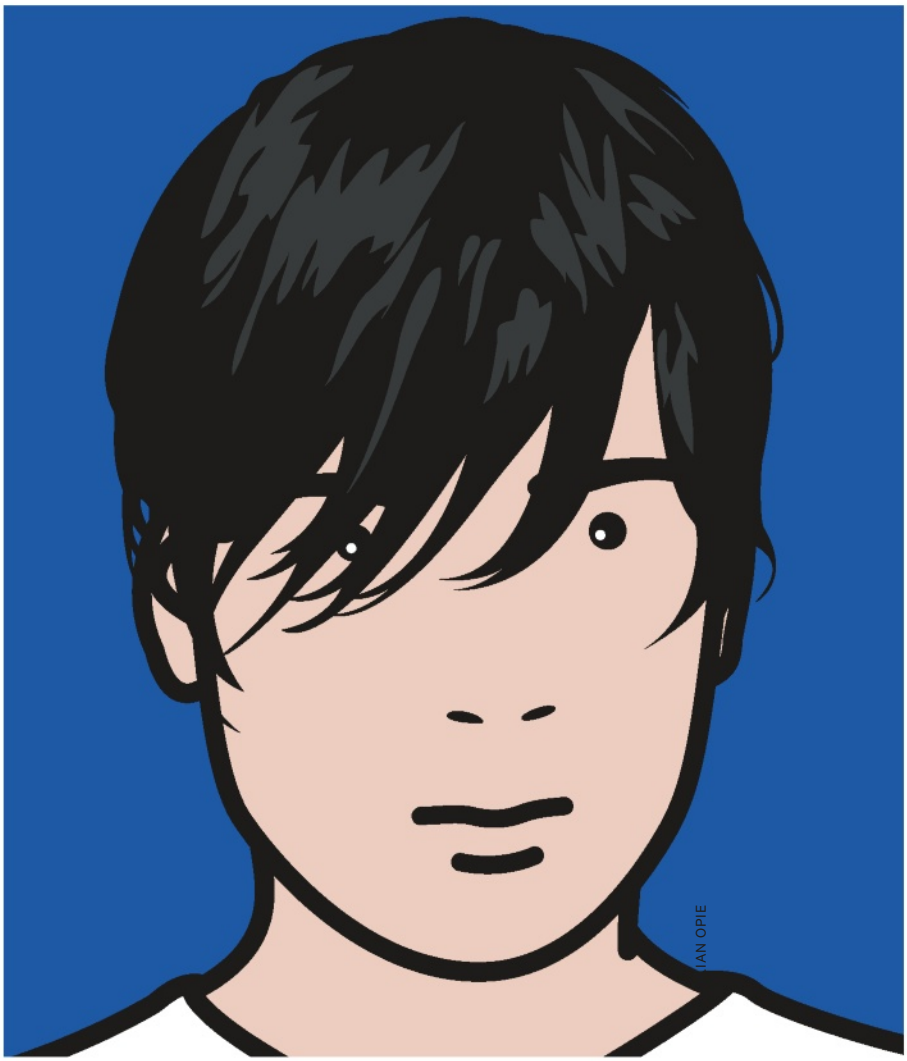
Profile on... Alex



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At the peak of his Groucho high-living, Blur's heartthrob, ladies man and bon viveur wrote a week-in-the-life diary for NME. Hurrah!

WEDNESDAY

It's Wednesday again. Hooray. It's down to Radio 1 and I'm trying to think of three things to say, but the taxi's not here and I look like a potato. Going on the radio is like talking to a nice girl. You think of perfect things to say, and things to talk about, but you can't premeditate love or the media.

Damon goes off to meet some important people and I go to Tesco's. Get a trolleyful. I'm with the proper girls. It's 6pm. I like listening to them talk. They make each other giggle.

Get some ice and shake up some White Russians. Toss the Mars/Freud coin and Mars it is. Mars is full of Campari slickers, so we take the Freud path to enlightenment. Damon arrives from his secret meeting with the government and we adjourn to his exclusive drinking club. If he goes to pubs, the poor lad just gets arseholes asking him when the next album's out or whether he really is a sex flop. I bask under a veil of relative anonymity, which is fine.

Damon's club, The House, is very new and understanding. They do things like goat's cheese *en croute* and it's full of the *EastEnders* cast and Cassandra from *Only Fools And Horses*. Chris, our accommodating host, sorts us out with a comfortable white Burgundy and our favourite table. Nobody asks Damon when the album's out because nobody cares.

Phone Phil 'Dirty' Daniels at the Vaudeville and arrange to meet him in his new pub, the nearest one to the theatre. Then it's the *Ed Wood* party in a prison in SE1. Film parties are usually amusing but this

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one was up its arse – men in dresses and no vol-au-vents or dry martinis. Boo. Walked over Tower Bridge and got a taxi back to Mars. Had huge brandy. Said some lewd things. Went home with the girls.

THURSDAY

The sun shines on Old Compton Street. It's going to be a day of bone-idle boozing. Hoorah! The girls go off for some ackers and I take the hangover for a drink. A Bloody Mary. A naughty, delicious, morning, irresponsible BM.

Go to Mars to find out what we were doing last night. Then remember John Virgo's snooker challenge in The Crown, and floss up there. Cheers. Virgo's trick shot. Everyone is at work. We are drinking in the West End. The grown-ups' playground. We are children again. We squabble and we snigger and want more sweeties.

Go back to check the Freud temperature, which is sub-zero, cryogenic, no fun. Go home to play cards and listen to The Bee Gees. The Mackey phones. Pulp's midweek is two, so we invent a new cocktail called a Brandy Alexbanana and play the 'shithead' game.

Andy and Helen and Damon arrive and we go back to the John Virgo game. Someone asks Damon when the album's coming out, so we have to go back to The House.

FRIDAY

"I've only had a couple of cunts, drinkstable."

I have a one-dimensional life. I have a nasty lump on my right forefinger. Oh dear, it's the analytical, not very friendly hangover. I even dreamt about the music business. Go to the *NME* office on the 25th Floor and get jolly listening to Rod Stewart. Eat some goat's cheese in the Mars and go to football party at the Atlantic. Talked about Twiglets at length. The only things that taste like Twiglets are Marmite and stilton. Gin martinis, rocket fuel.

SATURDAY

Hangover: *n*, The delayed after-effects of drinking too much alcohol.

Intense fear. The fear, the fear. The crapulent abyss, the chasm of the delayed after-effects. Well, we were showing off a bit. Oh, but the fear, the sweaty nose, the nausea, the sky may crack, the legs aren't there. Grim. This is a bad hangover, an anxious one, and it wants to get its mates and go drinking right now.

The flat is a good metaphor for my head. Wednesday's mashed potato gone brown and lemons everywhere. I don't think anyone likes me. I certainly don't.

We're going to Bath, Britain's poshest city, to make B-sides with old chum Stephen Duffy. Have to get the Jif lemon out as the pares are staying in the flat for the weekend. Hide the offensive Damien Hirst drawing, bleach the bog, all that stuff.

Stir up some Bloody Marys for the journey – vodka, lemon juice, tabasco, Worcester, sherry, pepper in the thermos. Cheers. Run out of pants. Have to get some in Bath.

Leave the keys in Freuds.

A lot of fear-miles later, we land in Beckington, Wool Hall Studios. Residential studios. Cheers, mates. Snooker, videos, library, log fires, proper! Monsieur Le Duffy is feeling fine. A refined, resigned sage of a gentleman.

Beckington's got one pub, the Woolpack, known to us as the Fudgepack. We play the 'making up band names' game. Geezer was the best one. Everyone's a little boisterous. The Hub Club looks like the best bet in Bath, as there's some dreadful-sounding roots reggae in the Moles. E still seems to be popular in the provinces, as are shagging, drinking and dancing.

Send Ben round to Real World to get Menswear to see if they want to play Scrabble but they are all tucked up in beddy-byes. A lot of Armagnac is sipped and the Trivial Pursuit gets ridiculous. "Luftwaffe" is now a joke and is being told quite a lot. I find an enormous loudspeaker of cheese in the fridge and some local crackers. Playing 'Blue Moon' on the piano when the sun rises.

SUNDAY

A fantastic slow-motion crispy vocabulary-enhancing hangover. Hoorah! Fortune flops me an ace.

"It's all a bit lively. On the gin. Probably should have eaten"

Alex James

Play snooker and table tennis as old Duffer is mixing a track. Nice lady makes us cauliflower cheese and roasties. My desert-island dinner. Bash the song out after supper. It's called 'Tempus Fugit', Latin for time flies. B-sides can have Latin names.

Watch *Performance* with the volume turned down. Don't like the business with the paint, get the horn in the bit where Mick's getting his nose licked, though.

BANK HOLIDAY MONDAY

Up early. Have to be in Putney at 12.30pm for a rehearsal with my famous mates. My one-dimensional studio-to-studio existence continues.

Graham's very quiet. The horn section isn't coming after all. They've got perfect pitch and timing and they don't need to. Damon's got a keyboard that makes squelching noises and we amuse ourselves playing 'Pick Up The Pieces' with sarcastic squelches and muso expressions.

Do a Tesco and come home to watch the Bond. Mother has scrubbed everything, and all the gin's gone. Deep-fry some camembert in the clean wok and eat it with jam. Go to bed for 14 hours and dream I'm a fish.

TUESDAY

We're doing *The Late Show* so it's down to TV Centre. Hyde Park smells a bit manurey. Play a bit of Black Maria/Scabby Haggy/Hunt The Cunt with Dave and Laura, our keyboard player. Go to *NME* photo exhibition and drink free beer for a good cause. All the usual mates are here, natürlich. The hipperati, the swingers... I could name names but it would be dull.

Round to the Mars. Duffy's having his birthday there. Even Dave's come out. It's all a bit lively. We're on the monster gin. Probably should have eaten. Someone suggests a game of earsy-kneesy-nosey but we've got to go to Stringfellows to check out this silly cocktail band, The Mike Flowers Pops Orchestra.

In the past, Mr Stringfellow has made defamatory character references in the tabloids but we've all passed a lot of water since then and it's always better to be friends, kids. He's drinking VATs so we join each other. It's very dark and Dunhill International and you have to shout rather than chat. It's good if you're beery drunk because of all the big bosoms but it's not really a monster gin-drunk place.

WEDNESDAY

Go to Bodum and get a posh new cafetiere as the cheeseboard fell on the old one. Jilly Cooper walks past. She probably has service washes or dry cleans.

Matthew "Daddy" Longfellow, who directed top rockumentary *Starshaped*, is having a triangular sandwiches and olives affair upstairs at the Windmill, Mill Street. Film parties are always the best – bullshitteramas, castles in Spain, ridiculous "I'll get my people to talk to your people", breakfast, online, offline, "deadline" and they all shag their secretaries. God bless 'em.

Kiss everybody and cab down to the Africa Centre to watch Heavy Stereo who are just Whirlpool without the fat one. The music business high court is already there. McGees and Lamacqs and Rosses and Reids ad infinitum.

I have some horrible fizzy beer and go outside to be sick. Someone follows me and asks for my autograph. The band are late on and we have to dive off to the, erm, Mars bar as Pulp are having their "Hooray, we're Number Two" party. The entire music business descends and pretends to like each other. Andy Ross calls it the Good Mixer Syndrome. It used to be just me and Russell and then Blur sold a million and Russ left Chapterhouse to concentrate on his drinking.

Phone Uncle Jake at Browns, to ask if it is OK to bring 100 people down. He's very reasonable and helpful. You can tell how sophisticated a place is generally by how far they tolerate states of extreme drunkenness, provided it's not violent or aggressive.

Have a few beers and talk utter gobshite with Steve Mackey, my favourite bassist, and stumble home with the proper girls. Put the Kylie Minogue on and get the phone book out. Phone everyone. "Morning schmorning!" we scream down people's answerphones. Play the entire Oasis album down Albarn's, and worse probably. Pink gin, white Russian and ruby red Margaux. You only live once. Get drunk, be a tart, enjoy ourselves. ■

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1993 press image for 'Modern Life Is Rubbish' shot by Paul Spencer

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At the dogs in the inlay of the 'Parklife' CD, shot by Paul Postle

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At HMV Forum in London, February 2012, shot by Dean Chalkley

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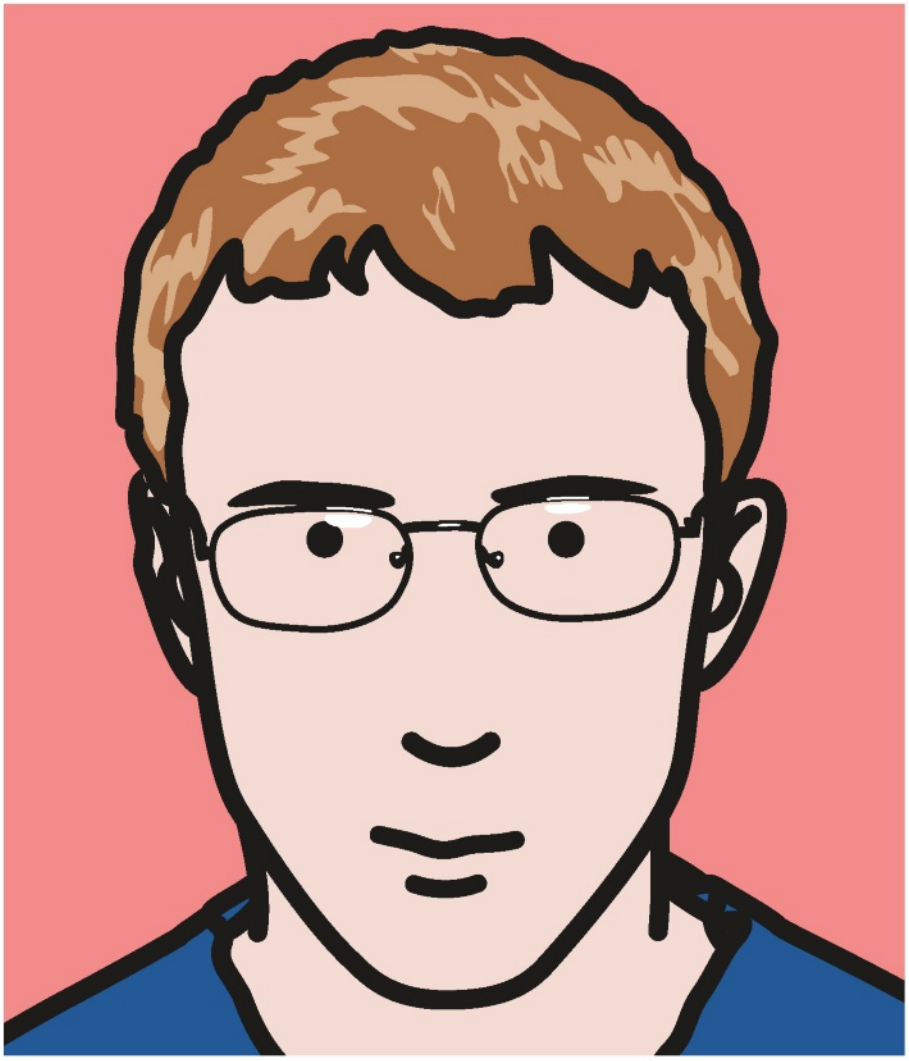
Profile on...

Dave



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That magnificent Dave in his flying machine took NME on a dive-bombing trip to find his old house, then spilled the beans on ambition and being a miserable drunk

Climb into the leather-upholstered Mercedes. Say a courteous hello to the shirt-and-tied chauffeur, check the air conditioning, slip into your seat and relax. The driver asks your destination, so give him the address of your comfortable home just outside Camden, north London. Talk to the journalist beside you as you drive; tell him about your new record, describe what it's like to be in the biggest band in Britain. When you reach home, ask the driver to wait five minutes while you collect your shades and a large black flightcase.

Get back in the car, give directions to Elstree. Look through the window as you zip through Hampstead, Golders

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"Mentally, I got quite ill. I started to get very paranoid"

Dave Rowntree

NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS
SEPTEMBER 16, 1995

Green, Hendon, Mill Hill and Edgware until you reach the tree-lined roads of Elstree and the familiar left-hand turn that takes you into your local airfield. Wait for the driver to open your door, tell him to wait for two hours and explain that you are flying down to the south coast. Stroll over to the control tower, check the weather to make sure it's safe to fly and then wander over to your new pride and joy; a four-seater private aeroplane that *you* own.

Untie the aircraft, open your flightcase, take out your logbook and hop aboard. Drive to the end of the runway and look back over your left shoulder to make sure no other aircraft is landing. Check your instruments, laugh as you tell your companions they are your second load of passengers, then ease out the throttle, pull back the steering column and... WHOOOOSH! You're airborne.

Allow yourself a wide grin. As you head into the clouds, you can't help thinking how sweet life is when you're Dave Rowntree, the drummer from Blur.

Dave Rowntree wanted to fly when he was a child. In January he decided to book lessons, reasoning he would hire a plane whenever a royalty cheque arrived. In February he decided to buy a half-share in a plane after Blur swept up at the Brits. By summer, 'Parklife' had sold more copies than anyone imagined possible and Dave decided to go the whole hog and buy his own light aircraft.

"I was thinking that learning to fly was probably the most I was going to be able to afford," he says. "But then the Brits happened and everything went mental. I started learning to fly about three months ago, and erm, I think everyone who flies wants to buy their own plane 'cos it's so much hassle hiring a plane 'cos you always get a different one and you can't keep your own things in the glove compartment."

En route to the airfield, he dismisses the notion that flying is a millionaire's game.

"Aircraft cost the same as an expensive car," he says. What he really means, though, is 'a very expensive car', if you consider the amount Rowntree spends on maintenance each year, which, would pay for a new top-of-the-range Mini, that flying lessons cost £99 per hour (and you have to take at least 40 to get a licence) and the cost of taking out insurance and paying for a space at your local airfield.

Today's weather is appalling for flying. The air is smooth and warm, but a putrid smog has settled over London and visibility is poor.

"You can normally see as far as Canary Wharf," our pilot reckons. "But today it's awful."

Dave obtained his pilot's licence four weeks ago and immediately bought a plane from the classified section of a specialist magazine. "But it's frustrating living so far away from the airfield. When you've got a new toy, you want to play with it."

We ascend over Elstree, past man-made lakes, housing estates, cricket pitches and factories. The radio crackles: "There's something ahead, it could be a glider." Dave stares through his windscreen. "Well, I can't see it," he laughs. "Oh well."

We fly down to Clacton, but at 2,400 feet and 94 knots I realise there is a small hole in the window next to my head. Discretion gets the better part of me and I decline to mention it to Captain Rowntree.

We pass over speedboats, yachts and Clacton pier, then head for our ultimate destination – Colchester.

"I've only flown over Colchester once before." He stares at the ground 2,500 feet below. "Isn't it a horrible sprawl?" He tilts to the right and peers out at housing estates as he looks for his former home. He spots a huge green-topped building which Colchester people call 'Jumbo' and, after 59 minutes and 14 seconds, he sees his old estate, not far off the A12. He circles overhead: "But I can't see the house," he says, and then begins a second circle over his home town. "Colchester people will hate me for buzzing their town."

Dave looks out the window and then the realisation hits me; he's taken both hands off the controls and not bothered to turn the autopilot on. "I think that's my old house. Oh, no it isn't. Sorry." And he realises he doesn't have the autopilot on and his hands are nowhere near the controls. "Eh," he says, and laughs. He lights another Marlboro. He is a man among men.

As he comes in to land, he spots a hot air balloon and says he hopes there aren't many more about because that would cause problems. Thankfully, there aren't and we manage a remarkably smooth landing back at Elstree. After one hour and 39 minutes flying, we are impressed.

Two hours later Rowntree is sitting in the Spread Eagle pub in Camden, sipping his orange juice and lemonade. He stopped drinking a couple of years ago to preserve his physical and mental health.

"Mentally, I got quite ill. I started to get very paranoid. Some people are happy drunks but when I was drunk I was always the one in the corner saying "WooaaahhhhhOoohhhhh.' I don't know what I was saying, something pathetic. I was always a miserable drunk and when I was pissed it started to affect me mentally."

Dave spent a year smashed out of his head. Every morning he would wake up in a cold sweat and wonder where he had been the night before and what he had been doing. "One morning I just thought, I don't need this anymore, this is bollocks." And that's when he stopped drinking.

He says it's not difficult being the only sober one in Blur. Each member has a different role and he has taken on the role of the straight, level-headed businessman.

"If there's a technical problem with the band I usually get the first phone call. If it's about going to a party then Alex will get the first call, if it's a TV show in Milan then Damon will get the first call and... I can't really think what Graham would get the first call about. I suppose it would be, 'Will you get out of bed? You're late'. That's when Graham would get the first phone call."

Is Blur a democratic band?

"It's definitely Damon's band, Damon has the last say on everything. He has a wide portfolio."

He credits their rabid sense of competition for their success too. "With 'Parklife' we felt we were in major competition with Suede at the time because we felt they'd nicked all our ideas. The competition we had with Suede and the bitterness we felt – because we thought we should be doing as well because we always felt we were writing excellent songs and making great albums – gave us a huge kick up the backside. That's one of the reasons why 'Parklife' was as good an album as it was."

What it's like to be in Britain's biggest band?

"Seven years ago we were just about to sign a record deal and I was the happiest man on Earth. But when you get a record deal you realise you're at the bottom of a tall ladder with another 30 extremely tall ladders above that.

"We've established ourselves as the biggest band in Britain and that's a fair few ladders up. But I don't want to get mathematical about it. I talk in the broadest possible terms about ladders. There are ladders above and below..."

And, with that, his wife arrives to meet him, he finishes his interview and heads off to a swish London restaurant. It's a good life being Dave Rowntree.

■ ANDY RICHARDSON

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The Battle of Britpop

A simple clash of single release dates turned into the bout of the decade as 'Country House' went up against 'Roll With It' to decide whether Blur or Oasis would become crowned champions of Britpop. It was the chart battle that defined the era, and Andy Richardson counted the blows...

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BONNY ON CLYDE:
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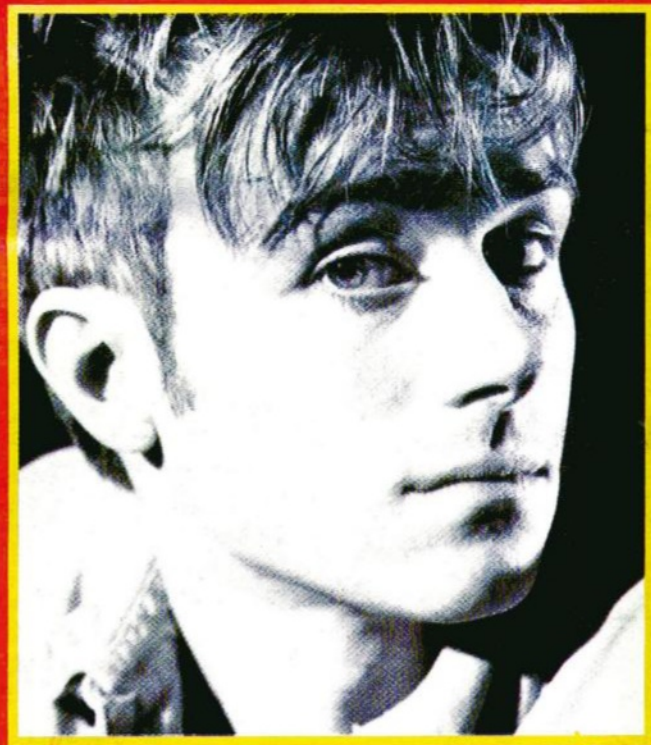
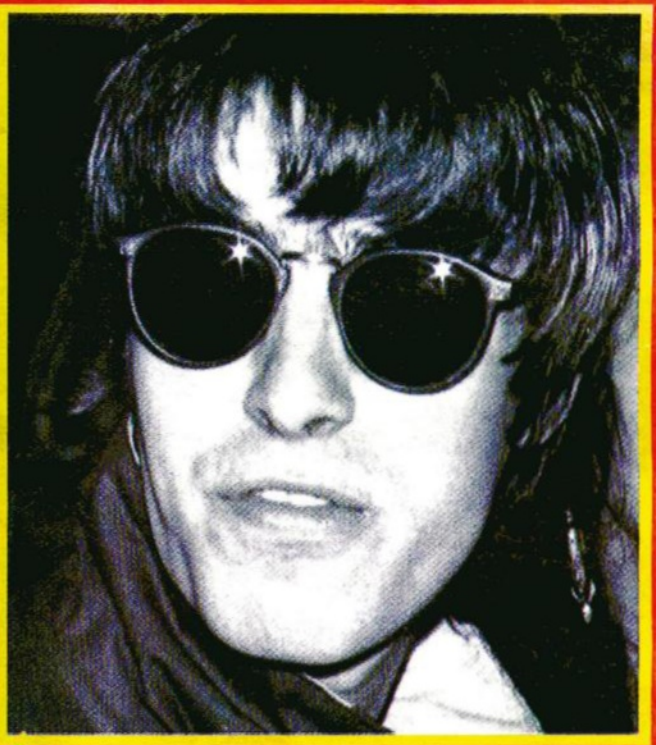
BRITISH HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP





BLUR VS OASIS

AUGUST 14: THE BIG CHART SHOWDOWN

THE CRANBERRIES ★ SUGGS ★ GARBAGE ★ THE FALL ★ ISAAC HAYES

Images by Steve Double/Hulton Deutsch

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My lords, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Heavyweight Championship Of Britpop. In the dark blue corner, wearing the Chelsea shirts and weighing in with four Brats, four Brits, a Number One album but no previous Number One single, the undisputed leaders of the Camden scene, BLUR!

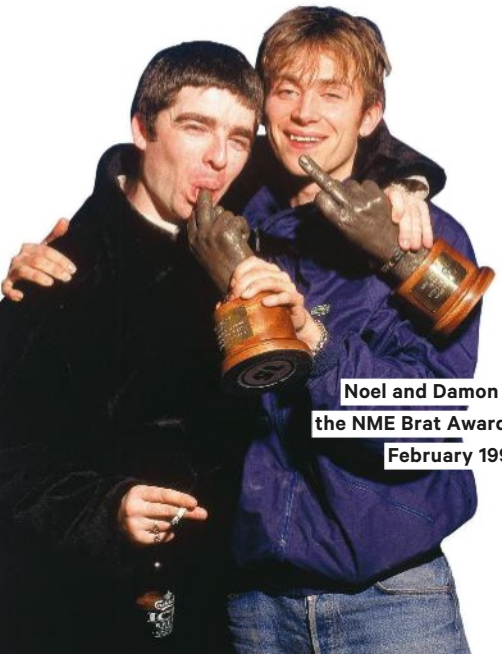
And in the light blue corner, wearing the Man City shirts and weighing in with three Brats, one Brit, a Number One album and boasting a previous chart-topping single, the northern kings of rock'n'roll, OASIS!

This is a head-to-head contest over seven furious, unit-shifting days and you, gentle reader, must act as judge. No matter how much you may waffle on about "erm, I like both bands, actually", the fact that Blur and Oasis have determined to release their new singles on the very same day is a rallying call for you to climb off that fence and declare your loyalties. In playgrounds, offices and pubs the length and breadth of this fair land, people are being asked to choose between the twin giants of Britpop. There's only one question that matters right now. Blur or Oasis: just whose side are you on?

And so, without any further ado... LET'S GET READY TO RUMBLE!

Who will be on top when those chart positions are announced on Sunday? What has prompted this extreme bout of machismo and why does it matter so much? After all, there have been other Britpop rivalries – the Sex Pistols versus The Clash, The Stone Roses versus Happy Mondays; classic standoffs that inspired each band to outdo their "enemies".

But never before have the gloves been laced so aggressively. Never before have the two most important movers and shakers on the Britpop scene actually had it out in public to determine who – when the cash registers have stopped ringing and the hysteria has finally died down – are the true undisputed people's champions of British rock'n'roll.



Noel and Damon at the NME Brat Awards, February 1994

This studio isn't big enough for the both of us: Blur Vs Oasis at San Francisco's Live 105

"The two largest bands in England right now together in one radio station!"

NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS
AUGUST 12, 1995

It wasn't meant to be like this. At one point, the power-brokers of Oasis' label Creation and Blur's label Food reputedly struck an agreement whereby they would avoid simultaneous releases. But both grew in confidence while working on their new albums, each becoming convinced they were recording the best LP of 1995.

Snide sideswipes and barbed comments began to pepper the rival bands' interviews. Claims and counter-claims ricocheted through the press. And suddenly, with awesome inevitability, Blur's 'Country House' and Oasis' 'Roll With It' were scheduled for release, head-to-head, on August 14.

So how come Blur and Oasis are suddenly up for a scrap? As recently as February, Damon was broadcast around the world saying that Blur's Brit Award for Best British Band should be shared with Oasis, and Noel was telling *NME* that Blur were a top band, encouraging other members of Oasis to get off their arses and dance when Blur performed later in the night as both parties repaired to the Underworld club. Eventually, Liam was thrown off the premises for repeatedly berating one of Camden's most famous (and visibly pissed off) citizens.

The following October the bands met again by fluke. They were both in America and turned up at San Francisco's Live 105 radio station for separate interviews with DJ Steve Masters. A source close to Oasis recalls: "Neither band knew what was happening till they turned up. I think they were both more annoyed at the radio station than each other."

Damon was introduced to Liam by the DJ. "Geezer," said Damon. "Wanker," was Liam's reply. Oasis were in the studio first, Noel and Liam performing an acoustic version of 'Supersonic' before Masters suggested Blur join them. "Bring 'em in," said Liam. Masters went barmy: "This is the moment!" he screamed. "The two largest bands in England right now together in one radio station!"

"Yeah," said Liam in a fake American accent, "in one ring, man!"

There was some banter about American gigs before Liam suggested he should choose a track from 'Parklife' because, "I like a lot of this album, actually."

Damon laughed: "Don't say that on air!"

Listeners were encouraged to call in and all the initial ones were for Blur, before a few Oasis fans got on the line. By the end it had turned into a competition about who got the most calls. Blur won, 5:4.

The bands met again this January at the NME Brat Awards. Liam baited Damon backstage when the duo were asked to pose for a photograph which would have been considered as a cover shot for the *NME*.

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KEVIN CUMMINS, AARON AXELSEN, LIVE 105 SF

Damon readily agreed but Liam refused, stood toe-to-toe with Damon and said: "I'll tell ya. To your face. Your band's full of shit. Right. So I'm not going to do a photo with ya."

Damon remained commendably cool as Liam again tried to wind him up saying, "You don't honestly want a picture with me, do you? Well, I don't really want one with you. I'm gonna have the arse and the balls to say so." But then, with impeccable timing and in front of two *NME* photographers, Graham Coxon planted a kiss on the cheek of a stunned Liam.

Blur made light of the incident and held out an olive branch at February's Brits with their 'Best British Band' dedication to Oasis. Damon also made a speech saying fans should take Blur, Oasis and Eternal singles to their teachers at school and say: "Tell us how to do this!"

However, relations steadily deteriorated. An undercurrent of north versus south competitiveness became evident and a working class/middle class feud lent their rivalry a bitter edge.

Noel Gallagher has also claimed he only complimented Blur on being a "top band" because he had been out of it on E at the time. Matters were scarcely calmed by Liam declaring in print that he rather fancied Damon's partner Justine Frischmann of Elastica.

And so the platform for this weekend's head-to-head was built and in place.

Blur were to release a single earlier in the summer but the continued international success of 'Parklife' delayed the release so that new Blur product would not be battling it out in the shops against their still lively back catalogue. Initially the band wanted to release a track from the album called 'Stereotypes' but that plan was scrapped following their London Mile End Stadium gig when fans showed a preference for 'Country House' and critics dubbed it one of the set's highlights.

Producer Stephen Street also favoured 'Country House'. "It's a good bridge between 'Parklife' and what will come on this album," he told *NME*. "We were thinking of putting out something a bit harder. But I said to Damon, ' 'Country House' is a great summer record. It's got that summer vibe, it's a great pop single and it sounds good on radio'."

Finally settling on 'Country House', the single was scheduled for release at the end of August (21 or 28) and their album, 'The Great Escape', in September. Those plans had been laid as far back as January. Blur expected an Oasis single about two weeks later, prior to the 'Morning Glory' album in October. But they hadn't banked on the guile of Creation nor the speed at which Noel would write and record his new songs.

Oasis decided to gazump Blur and scheduled 'Roll With It' for August 14. Blur were astounded – a disgusted Damon called producer Stephen Street saying: "You'll never guess what, they've brought forward the single release to clash with us. It's that Manchester thing of 'Come and have a go if you think you're hard enough!'"

After a series of phone calls between the band, Food, parent company Parlophone and Creation, Blur made the decision to go head-to-head.

So much for the build-up. Who's gonna win? The rational indicators point to Oasis. Their fans are the type who rush into record shops and buy records in the first week of release. And when Oasis advertise live gigs the initial ticket sales are immense. When the autumn tour was announced a fortnight ago, 35,000 calls were received in the first five minutes. Noel is certainly confident, calling Blur "a bunch of middle-class wankers trying to play hardball with a bunch of working-class heroes. There will be only one winner. Our ambition is to have more achievements and milestones than anybody in England, including The Jam." His producer Owen Morris agrees, claiming that 'Morning Glory' is comparable only to Nirvana's 'Nevermind' in terms of great records released in the '90s.

Will it be Blur's 'Country House'...

...or Oasis' 'Roll With It'?

Noel, uncharacteristically, plays that down."Owen Morris is fat, Welsh and has a tendency to wear women's clothing so I wouldn't believe a world that comes out of his mouth."

Albarn is less inclined to shout the odds in public. As *NME* went to press, he declined to talk directly about the clash. In recent weeks, however, he has spoken about Blur's rivalry with Oasis.

"It's good so many English bands are doing well," he told *NME*. "The competition is strong but we're not worried." He was also interviewed by Radio 1's Chris Evans, who played 'Roll With It' to Damon over the phone. The Blur singer, hungover in a hotel room in Glasgow, responded by singing: "*And I like it, I like it, I like it, I like it... who-o-o-oaho!*" to the tune of Status Quo's 'Rockin' All Over The World'.

NME has tracked down some of the most important players in Britpop's big fight to speculate who is most likely to take the Number One spot. Let battle commence. ■

THE INSIDER VERDICTS

Chris Morrison, Blur's manager

"I think it's good fun. It's exciting for everybody but nerve-wracking for us. I'm quietly confident. If the bands had released singles in different weeks we'd both have had more chance of getting to Number One and in that way it would have made sense. But who said music was about making sense?"

Marcus Russell, Oasis' manager

"Noel wants to have his four Number Ones and you can put your cards on that happening. But this band is about the music. It's not about chart positions, it's bigger than that. I wouldn't bet on either song. I don't need to bet, I manage Oasis."

Stephen Street, producer of 'Parklife' and 'The Great Escape'

"From what I can gather, Oasis have done this deliberately to stop Blur getting a Number One single but if there's any justice in the world they still will. They brought forward their single and it's complete shit to say we've engineered it. If Owen Morris thinks so, he's talking out his arse."

Owen Morris, producer of 'Definitely Maybe' and 'Morning Glory'

"Blur are cheeky cunts for doing this – but Oasis will have them. I really don't like the Blur single but then I don't like Blur. They're a joke band. They're not even cockneys! They're from Cheltenham or something. Blur are a Chas & Dave for students whereas 'Morning Glory' is astonishing."

Andy Ross, founder of Food

"I bumped into Alan McGee the other night and we couldn't remember the last time there was this much interest in two singles coming out. It harks back to the '60s with The Beatles and The Stones, and I'm sure McGee would say the same."

Alan McGee, founder of Creation

"This is the most important time in British music since punk. Groups like Blur, Supergrass and Pulp are in the charts, they are the mainstream. Finally kids are embracing these bands again."

Justine Frischmann, Elastica

"It's great that they're both going for Number One. I think The Beatles and The Stones analogy is right, as long as Blur are The Beatles because I've always preferred The Beatles."

Danny Goffey, Supergrass

"It's a cool idea even though it's a bit stupid. They'll probably sell the same as each other. We met Oasis at Roskilde and they're sound blokes."

Mark Morriss, The Bluetones

"I have a feeling that the BPI and Gallup will make them both Number One. They'll do something really chummy which would be a cop-out."

Tim Wheeler, Ash

"'Roll With It' is fucking hot, man. And the album is blinding. It's absolutely brilliant. It's one of the best records I've heard. We're all up for Oasis. Fuck Blur, man."

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"EVERY NEW
OPEN, THERE

And the winners are... BLUR!

Sparking the highest single-sales figures in almost a decade, Blur Vs Oasis had become a national obsession and a media phenomenon, the new Beatles Vs Stones

Sunday, 6:55pm, on the week that more singles were sold in the UK than any other in the past 10 years. Blur Vs Oasis fever has reached a crescendo.

For a few in the know, the result is a foregone conclusion. Everyone else is huddled around a radio with breathless anticipation. Many of the oldsters sit back in their favourite armchairs, smiling indulgently and puffing on their pipes, casting their minds back to other long hot summers, of clashes between T Rex and Slade, Duran Duran and Culture Club, as they waited for that all important Top 10 rundown on the weekend chart show.

Then, that magic moment approaches; Take That get the Number Four slot followed by The Original followed by... Oasis. Which means that Blur have seized the Number One spot.

Over at Blur Central, the joy is uncontained.

Champagne corks are popping, Andy Ross, Food Records supremo, is pissed and talking bollocks and Dave Rowntree is already under the table. It seems that Damon Albarn – just back from holiday – is a bit taken aback. Just before *NME* reaches him on a crackly mobile phone, with the sound of PAAAARTYYING in the background, Radio 1 and all the nationals are fighting for quotes, asking dumb questions like, "How does it feel to be Number One?"

So, Damon, how does it feel to be Number One?

"Great. I heard it just before I went off to play football," says the still-sober singer. "Andy Ross came down to the pub to tell us. I still can't really believe it. It's been completely mad this week... every newspaper you open, there we are."

Did you expect to win?

"To be honest, no," he says. "I sort of believed all the papers, including *NME*, who told me that Oasis were going to win. Including Phil Daniels, although he told me that was a misquote, which I can well believe. It has come as a bit of a surprise to me."

What about suggestions that the barcode problems on the Oasis single sleeve lost them valuable sales?

"Well, it was Oasis that wanted to play it this way," he says, not a little sadly. "They started all this. At the end of the day, they had just as many records in the shops, but we sold more."

For the record, 1.8million singles were sold in Britain last week and nearly 500,000 were Blur and Oasis singles. 'Country House' sold 270,000 copies while 'Roll With It' clocked up a still impressive 220,000 sales. In any other week the Manc lads would have been straight in at Number One. So what does the future hold now for Damon and Blur?

"I don't know," he confesses. "But now I'm just going to get pissed."

Oasis, currently on tour in Japan, were unavailable to comment on Sunday. However, singer Liam and guitarist Bonehead were spotted at Ash's London LA2 gig (Friday, August 18) by *NME*'s Stuart Bailie and Keith Cameron. Tim Wheeler asked the crowd to cheer if they liked Blur and then if they liked Oasis, before dedicating a song to the latter. Both Ash and Oasis are produced by Owen Morris.

After the show, Liam bounded over to *NME*'s Stuart Bailie and began slapping him on the head. "What's all this bullshit about *NME* Single Of The Week then?" he asked. ('Country House' having recently earned that accolade in these pages). He then loped off singing a hilarious parody of the Blur song.

■ TOMMY UDO

NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS
AUGUST 26, 1995

"It was Oasis that wanted to play it this way. They started all this" Damon Albarn

WSPAPER WE
E WE ARE..."

WHAT THE PAPERS SAID...

Blur Job," screamed *The Daily Sport*. "DISCORD IN DISC WORLD," shouted the *Financial Times*. "POP TITANS GO HEAD TO HEAD," said the *Daily Mail*. Even *The Times* offered a stuffy "BLUR FROM LONDON". Yes, in a week where news leaked that Saddam Hussein was preparing nuclear weapons, everyday folks were still getting slaughtered in Bosnia and Mike Tyson was making his comeback, tabloids and broadsheets alike went Britpop crazy.

Since *NME*'s British Heavyweight Championship cover two weeks ago, every national newspaper, TV station and radio network has covered the Blur/Oasis clash. *NME* has been inundated with requests for interviews from the smallest of far-flung weekly newspapers to the World Service and ITN.

The Sun's showbiz columnist Andy Coulson told *NME*: "I've been surprised by the level of coverage. But it's not often you get two of the biggest bands in Britain releasing singles on the same date."

On who would win, the media was divided. On Tuesday the *Daily Express* ran a "world exclusive" that revealed "Oasis set to win race for the top" with the Mancs outselling their London rivals four to one. Two days later, the *Express* announced, "Blur disc sales put Oasis in the shade".

May bust men win

The Sun, August 14 1995

Oasis set to win race for the top

Daily Express, August 15 1995

NEWS

Blur disc sales put Oasis in the shade

Daily Express, August 17 1995

The story revealed Take That would be toppled by Sunday and told how "Blur were beating Oasis by a whisker in the battle of the pop bands".

Today described the contest as "the rock war of the '90s". They reckoned Oasis had a head start because of a deprived childhood and described how they had stolen this year's musical agenda with a "potent cocktail of brilliant tunes, drugged-up debauchery and an undercurrent of violence".

Today made no outright predictions as to the result but ran an "exclusive" two days later about how fake estate agents were helping Blur. Parlophone had manufactured boards marked "For Sale, Blur's Country House, 14 August, Enquire Within" across London. *Today* reported: "the posters have caused havoc at the headquarters of Parlophone. They moved out their central London office last week. Now the new occupiers have been inundated with calls asking for details." By Friday, *Today* revealed Blur were well ahead, having sold 143,276 to Oasis' 115,447.

The *Daily Mail* got it badly wrong. Not only did they predict victory for Oasis, they printed a picture of them which included drummer Tony McCarroll, who was replaced months ago.

The battle between Oasis and Blur was fertile ground for the rivalry between *The Sun*, the *Mirror* and *Daily Star*. The Sun stole an early lead on Monday with risqué stills from Blur's 'Country House' video accompanied by the headline: "May bust men win". The *Mirror* hit back with a story about boxer Prince Naseem wooing Liam Gallagher's girlfriend. On Tuesday, the *Star* told us that Blur were well ahead, while the ever-reliable *Mirror* demurred – Oasis were out in front.

On Wednesday, *The Sun* hatched a mods-versus-rockers scenario when they discovered that Blur and Oasis both play venues in Bournemouth on the same night in September.

The Mirror focused on the £1 difference between the Blur and Oasis CDs. The *Daily Mail* said the victory made it cool to be middle-class, detailing the civil engineering career of Justine Frischmann's father! The *Daily Star* reported Damon had banned Dave from flying Blur in his private jet after having a nightmare about an air crash. *The Sun* quoted the Gallaghers' mum Peggy, who said Blur had written a good single but Liam was sexier than Damon.

Blur stayed well ahead of Oasis in TV exposure throughout the week. On Wednesday, Damon presented *Britpop*, a special featuring Blur performing 'Country House' in plus-fours and deer-stalkers and a who's who of British bands from Supergrass to Sleeper, Powder to Pulp. Everyone, that is, except Oasis! The Blur/Oasis story was also covered in depth with appearances on 10 programmes, including *The O-Zone*, *London Tonight*, *The Big Breakfast* and the *Six O'Clock News*.

Oasis performed 'Roll With It' on *Top Of The Pops*, with Noel singing and Liam playing guitar while Blur's 'Country House' video was the play-out over the credits. *The Sun*'s Andy Coulson predicts the story will run throughout the year. Who knows what the tabloids have in store for the Blur/Oasis rematch at Bournemouth in September?

Oasis were almost forced to concede before the contest began because of a problem with the printing of the barcode on some copies of 'Roll With It'. The barcode electronically registers the sale at tills in retail outlets and it was feared the faulty printing would damage the recording of sales.

The problem was spotted during routine checks and prompted an emergency meeting between Creation and Vital, their independent distributors. A Vital spokesman said 80 staff worked through the night last Thursday (August 10) restickering CDs and an annual conference in Bristol was cancelled so they could stick new barcodes on 100,000 copies of the single. However, on Thursday (August 17), staff from one retail chain told *NME* the Oasis single was still not registering, which meant some sales did not count towards the eventual chart placing. The band were reported to be furious.

■ ANDY RICHARDSON

JOHN FROST NEWSPAPERS

▶FROM THE ARCHIVE
"Our label bo
up completel
I knew we'

ss turned y pissed so 'd won..."

With the 'Life' trilogy reaching its conclusion in 'The Great Escape', Damon spilled the beans on the Blur Vs Oasis ruck and considered his position as the '90s cultural fulcrum and social commentator. Steve Sutherland got the beers in

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NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS
SEPTEMBER 16, 1995

The taxi overheats, stuck in the sweltering Knightsbridge gridlock. In the back, Damon Albarn cradles a bottle of warm lager and loudly hails the protesters chanting outside on the pavement.

"You're fucking brilliant!" he shouts through the cab window. The protesters, mostly in their teens, studiously ignore him, intent on haranguing the French consulate over the nuclear testing at Mururoa atoll.

"That's fucking brilliant," Damon repeats to no-one in particular. "I haven't seen a CND sign for fucking years!"

Fifteen minutes later, the same cab is stuck in the same traffic. We have struggled as far as Piccadilly Circus and have come to an unscheduled, grumbling stop outside the Trocadero. Tourists in Hard Rock Café T-shirts throng the pavements. Damon continues to cradle his now-empty bottle and sinks down in his seat. Too late, mate.

"DAMON!!! DAMON!!!" A gang of girls tug at each other's sleeves and point, egging on each other's hysteria. A couple risk life and limb to lurch, screaming and flailing, into the traffic. Miraculously, the cab starts to move. Damon gives them a sheepish grin and a royal wave and tries to remember where we're going.

When we eventually arrive at our destination, The Mars Bar, to meet Alex – major disaster – the legendary drinker and ladies' man is having a rare 'dry' day in preparation for tomorrow's *Top Of The Pops*. Damon's gutted. Only more lager will dull the ache of disappointment. So the bar is propped up, conversations grow into arguments as such conversations do and, an hour or so later, a homing device goes off in his head. "Justine's cooking!" he suddenly announces with palpable panic. He borrows a mobile phone and takes it out into the street where he can just be heard saying he'll be home soon and yelling exasperatedly into the night: "Darlin', I dunno whether the rice or stock goes in first!" There it is then, pop fans. When Justine cooks chez Albarn it's... risotto!

And there you have it: Blur, late August, 1995. Politically conscious to the extent that they cheer on CND and commit themselves to the War Child 'Help' project. Famous to the point of being screamed at in the street. And very drunk and very late indeed for a smart dinner date. Oh what a glorious life!

That's Blur, kings of all Swinging London and Britain's biggest, brightest and best pop group. Thanks to several years' hard work and a crucial shot of self-belief, right now Blur are basking in the glory of their first Number One single.

They are also confidently contemplating the release of their fourth LP, 'The Great Escape'. It's an album of much swagger, an album that's already odds-on to eclipse their mighty 'Parklife'.

Given the choice, Damon elected to talk about it all in a pub just down the road from the new EMI headquarters in west London. He is tanned, relaxed and quietly cocky after a week away on holiday – a week in which 'Country House ' topped the charts, a result doubly sweet considering his decision to go head-to-head with 'Roll With It', the latest single by media-fuelled arch-rivals, Oasis.

The night before, in this very same pub, Damon had been presented by his record company with a framed copy of the charts. The inscription read: "Better than Blur any fucking day of the week' – Liam Gallagher, Glastonbury Festival 1995." Underneath that it read, "NOT TODAY, SUNSHINE!"

The barmaid asks for, and gets, her photo taken with Damon. She pours the pints and says she's a Blur girl. Calls Oasis "northern louts". Damon grins. We retire to the garden.

This Blur Vs Oasis thing has grown pretty serious, hasn't it?
"Yeah, but no-one was having a go at Oasis on our side. I mean, I did that thing on Chris Evans' show when I said, 'It sounds a bit like Status Quo', but that was the only thing. It was all on their side."

Was that just good manners or was there some damage limitation on your part?
"Oh, we weren't 100 per cent confident that we would win. You can't be. It's naive to think any different."

Did you take it badly when Phil Daniels said he thought Oasis would be Number One?
"Oh yeah. It really upset me. I rang him up straight away and I had to go and see him that night to talk it over because... y'know, I really love Phil and I was hurt. I'm fine about it now, but at the time, when I read it, my top lip did start to quiver a bit."

He said you were crying on the phone.
"That's bollocks. He would say that, he's a fuckin' luvvie, innee?"

What if you had lost?
"I really don't know. I was on holiday with my parents because Justine and I had booked to go to Turkey until Elastica were offered Lollapalooza. It was fine until Thursday night and then the whole world changed and I started to worry. By Friday I was getting really agitated and on Saturday I flew back. There was no feedback at Heathrow. I got a cab and the cabbie didn't know who I was, which was a result. Justine didn't fly back from America until Saturday night so I went down to a cafe on the corner of my street and the lady there filled me in on all the press we'd been getting.

"When I got back to the house, there were no messages on the answer phone until Andy Ross [head of Food Records] rang up and said he was fairly confident. The next day I went to play football and Andy turned up completely pissed so I knew we'd won, which was brilliant because we needed to upstage 'Parklife' in some way.

"The irony is, if we hadn't had the thing going with Oasis, it wouldn't have been news. Everyone would have said, 'Of course they're gonna have a Number One'. But the Oasis thing made it into something very different, and yes, I did move our release date to match theirs! If you really want to know, the main reason was that, when Oasis got to Number One with 'Some Might Say', I went to their celebration party, y'know, just to say, 'Well done'. And Liam came over and, y'know, like he is, he goes, 'Number fookin' One!', right in my face. So I thought, 'OK, we'll see...'

"But let's not get into that. All that matters is it paid off, thank God. I think it's got to calm down now because everyone's looking forward to Bournemouth, aren't they, when we play that venue just across the road from them? I didn't set that one up. That's purely and genuinely a coincidence."

You're not going to back out, are you?
"No way."

"If we hadn't had the thing with Oasis, our Number One wouldn't have been news. I did move our release to match theirs"
DAMON ALBARN

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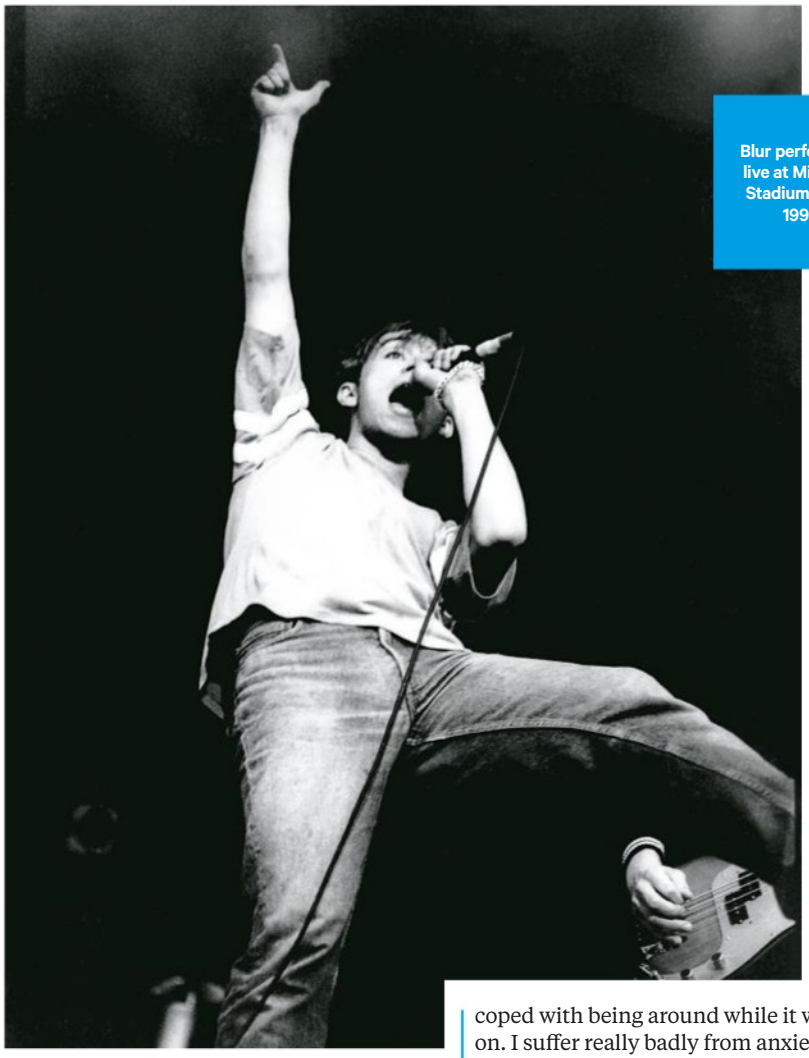

Blur performing live at Mile End Stadium, June 1995

A few minutes later, the interview is interrupted by a phone call from the Blur office. There has been communication from the Oasis camp to see if anything can be done about the Bournemouth clash. Rumours are rife that gangs of marauding Mancs have already hired coaches for the occasion while, for some reason, some heavy lads from Wolverhampton are planning to ruck on Blur's behalf. It seems everyone is gearing up for a bit of the old mods versus rockers ultraviolence.

Several lagers later, Damon will outlay his plans for The Battle of Bournemouth – a giant inflatable Number One will be flown above Blur's venue while the Blur logo, like the Batsign, will be projected on the wall of Oasis' venue. As our mums often say, boys will be boys.

Right now, the beer hasn't quite fuelled Damon's bravado to fighting talk and he's still reflecting on the week that changed his life forever: "I don't think I could have really coped with being around while it was going on. I suffer really badly from anxiety and stress."

Surely the most stressful thing was trying to work on a new album when 'Parklife' just wouldn't lay down and die in the nation's affections?
"Well, the pressures were strange. I've never had that thing about fame and making money being terrible. I just wanted to make something that I thought was good because I knew the attention this album would get. It had to be something that was at least a worthy successor to what we'd already done, something that was intelligent lyrically. That was the hardest thing.

"I find writing songs and catchy tunes really easy, but even with 'Country House', it has to have little things in it like 'Balzac' or 'Prozac'. Odd things. They're very important because, for me, that's what makes it interesting, slightly twisted pop music.

"I was more relaxed on this album generally. I didn't feel the anger that I've had in the past, I didn't feel that need to be a caricature of Britishness."

Thanks to Blur, however, there's nothing to be ashamed of now: London is the rock'n'roll capital of the world once more and they must take major credit for it. Damon seems to have embraced his role, even presenting the likes of Sleeper, Menswear, Pulp and Supergrass to the mums and dads on BBC2's Britpop special.

Did it embarrass you, behaving like the spokesman for a generation?
"No... I felt quite comfortable doing it. I didn't feel self-conscious at all. I mean, Jarvis has presented *Top Of The Pops* – which is his given vocation in life; he will be a great TV presenter and will have his own show. And, between us all, we run the pop culture in this country. That leaves us open to being completely derided by the next generation, which is fair enough. But right at this moment we have reached the point where it's our thing. That's all any generation can ever hope to achieve."

Notable absentees from the show were Oasis.
"They refused to do it."

Because you were presenting?
"No, no, no. I think one of the dangers with that band is they've got a lot of people around them who take too many drugs. That's been the way with a lot of those sort of bands whose main appeal is the feeling in the music of a sense of freedom, a lot of which is just an illusion. It's just drugs. I know I sound like an old fart and a reactionary, but I just think you last longer and you ultimately say a lot more if you're a bit more sober about it."

Have you heard '...Morning Glory'?
"Yeah. Funnily enough the person who played it to me was Paul Weller, but... um... I was really stoned and drunk and... um..."

Ha! After all you've just said.
"Well, exactly! Hahahaha!"

You're being diplomatic again.
"Am I?" Damon makes a face like a schoolboy caught nicking sweets. "I think Liam's an absolutely brilliant frontman, I really do. If I was a 15-year-old, I'd wanna be like Liam."

Listening to 'The Great Escape', it seems you're indulging in a fair old bit of hero worship yourself. 'Fade Away', for example, is The Specials.
"Yeah, despite what people think they were really more my band than Madness. I really loved Terry Hall and the idea of a band that was half black and half white and produced this music which was equally music hall and reggae. I'd love to be in a band like that. Y'know, that's why bands like Black Grape are great.

"I met Shaun Ryder for the first time doing *Top Of The Pops* and I was really scared because I'd gone to see them at the Astoria →

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and, y'know, when we started, they were the band. But he was really bright and witty and friendly, just a clever man who obviously gets fucked up a lot of the time."

Black Grape have done what The Stone Roses were supposed to do – they've achieved the great comeback.
"Oh, I don't put them in the same class. The Happy Mondays were utterly *the* band. I don't rate The Stone Roses much. They have no charm. It ain't over 'til the flat laddie sings!" (*sniggers*)

'Top Man' is Fun Boy Three, isn't it?
"It is, totally. I felt I could do that because I've been writing some songs with Terry Hall and I thought as repayment I'd just nick it. I told him about it so it's OK. We're all part of the same thing. I hope I can say that now and not sound pretentious. I think I am part of that whole line of things that has existed in this country, the heritage..."

You made a point at the Mile End gig to establish your East End roots and mock those who call you a Mockney. Does the claim that you're a fake get to you?
"Yeah. I've lived in Essex and London all me life. I didn't go to a public school, I went to a comprehensive. My parents are not very well-off but they're bright. I can't help that."

A lot of people liken you to the '60s Mick Jagger, the way his accent could be posh or wideboy, depending on the company he was keeping. Very untrustworthy!
"Yeah, I can see that. That's what I liked about Shaun Ryder. He's not bothered about whether you're real or not real, you're either somebody you like or somebody you don't. I mean, he lives in fucking Hampstead! That's brilliant. I love the idea of all those out-of-touch, rich, Hampstead-type people seeing him as some kind of guru – it's *The Buddha of Suburbia* all over again! He's The Bez of Suburbia, isn't he? Heehee. It's brilliant. That's what it's all about."

Classlessness?
"Yeah, that's what I want. The most interesting thing about all the press that surrounded the single was that it revealed this open sore in our society, our fascination with the divide between working-class and middle-class people."

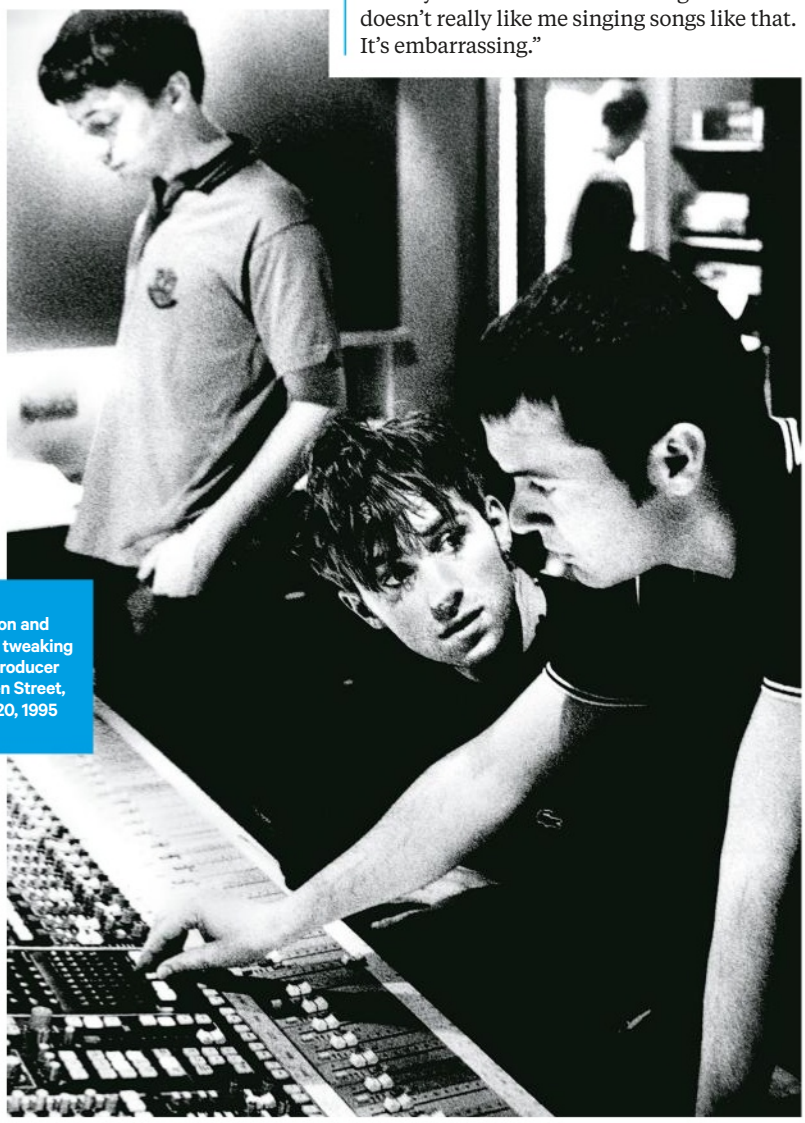
The Daily Mail saluted 'Country House' topping the charts with a bout of oik-bashing. The headline read: 'The Pop Victory That Makes It Hip To Be Middle-Class'.
"Yeah, and they printed a photo of my parents' house. That's an invasion of privacy, isn't it? I hate this class thing. It doesn't make any sense. It's useless. I think I'm a lot more relaxed about it than Justine is, though. She feels a lot more vulnerable because she did go to public school and she's a lot more sensitive about it. But it's unnecessary. It doesn't mean anything."

It's no secret that 'Country House' is your revenge on Dave Balfe [former partner in Food Records until he told Blur they were so useless they should quit and eventually did so himself].
"Hahahaha. That song's about me. The bit where it goes, '*Blow, blow me out*'. It happened at a time when I felt dreadful. It just helps me to take the piss out of myself."

When you all start buying country houses with your millions, you're dead.
"Of course, but the strange thing is, you predict your own nemesis all the time. Writing a song like 'Country House' and then getting one is inevitable..."

Why did you develop Dan Abnormal – your pseudonym?
"That's a name Justine gave me. I thought it was brilliant. He represents a lot of my less savoury habits. I mean, I think the song 'Dan Abnormal' is about the fact that I spent most of this year on my own because Justine's been away. So I spent quite a lot of time just getting drunk at night, going out and just doing what single people do... no, that's too bloody ambiguous, innit? What I meant to say was, I got into being completely alone. I would find myself in Soho at three in the morning, really drunk and just getting a taxi and going home to watch a dirty film or something. I've seen Justine for three weeks this year, which for someone you've lived with for a very long time is... (*trails off, that faraway pin-up look in his eyes*)."

The together/alone thing crops up a lot on this album.
"Yeah. The chorus of my favourite song on the album, 'Yuko And Hiro' – '*I never see you/ We are never together/I'll love you forever*' – is it really. It's as close to it as I can get. Justine doesn't really like me singing songs like that. It's embarrassing."



Damon and Graham tweaking with producer Stephen Street, April 20, 1995

KEVIN WESTENBERG, RETNA, @CHRISTAYLORPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

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'The Universal' is also very romantic. It's like 'This Is A Low' amplified to the max. It seems to take a heroic joy in being man enough to accept defeat.
"I do find it very hard to let go, and just allow myself to be a complete... what's the word? Ghost. I wish I was a ghost sometimes. The song I've done with Tricky, I think he's going to call it 'Pass Right Through You'. He wrote the lyric and I thought that was brilliant because it's something I always wanted to express. 'The Universal' is like that. It goes, '*When the days they seem to fall through you/Just let them go*'. It's probably very negative."

Rumour is you've been knocking around with David Bowie.
"No, not really. He seemed to follow me around for a week when we were working on the 'Country House' video with Damien Hirst."

He seems a bit lost nowadays.
"Yeah, I'm not sure how good he is... I'm not sure he spends enough time in the right places. I'm sure if he did, he would be good."

Why did you get involved with Hirst?
"Well, obviously I like to think that there was a period, 1987/88 at Goldsmiths, where there was a lot of good thought going on that would, in the future, express its generation in some form or other. But, in all honesty, it's Alex. You know he loves Groucho's. He likes yachts. He's in love with Damien Hirst. Poor Alex – he came of age in the wrong decade.

"Anyway, the first few times I met Damien, I was just saying, 'You're a cunt. You work with Dave Stewart, David Bowie, David Bailey, David fucking Gower... whatever. Get a life, man'. But he's a super bloke and he just had this huge amount of energy and he agreed with my idea that it would be great to make a video that was quite Benny Hill."

It didn't really work, did it?
"Well, it worked in the sense that we're Number One. And it got on the front page of *The Sunday Sport*. It worked, basically, because we used Page Three girls more than anything."

How did Graham take it? He goes out with one of Huggy Bear, doesn't he? His life must have been hell.
"Yeah. I think it was. But Graham does have the option to say, 'No, I don't want to do this' and, if he doesn't, then he just has to live with it. He's very complex, is Graham. There's about five different sides to Graham and it depends on which side on that particular day is the most dominant as to whether he agrees or disagrees with something. The weird thing was, a lot of people at our record company were really offended by the video and they wanted us to reshoot it. But when they showed it to their kids, they couldn't stop watching it, so suddenly, it became a great video. Not that it's a kid's video. I've had so many people come up to me and say stuff like, 'I can't believe you got Joanne Guest in your video. What's she like?' So it's worked because it has embraced the tabloid sentiment of what these last few weeks have been about."

"Graham does have the option to say, 'No, I don't want to do this' and, if he doesn't, then he just has to live with it"

DAMON ALBARN

For the first time the writing credits on the album all say 'Albarn'. Previously it appeared more democratic. Does this mean you've taken over?
"No, 'course not."

OK, so what was Graham's contribution to 'The Great Escape'?
"Well, what Graham wanted to do on this album was just to be odd. It's difficult to explain, but he just makes things sound right. Y'know, he puts a hardness to things that I do that isn't there otherwise. Like the guitar solo in 'Country House' is very subtle but it's just... mad. In the same way as me and my lyrics, he is not prepared to sit there and just blather out blues licks. But, having said that, I did really feel that I was fighting on this occasion so I was probably quite aggressive about what I wanted to do."

Why call the album 'The Great Escape'?
"Good film. Very tasty bloke, Steve McQueen. I couldn't come up with something that was funny. I'd burned myself out with the lyrics and Alex just came out with it. He didn't like it, but I did because it was exactly what the album was about, in the sense that all my characters have always been escaping or trying to become somebody else or returning to the fold after being out of it.

"Stephen Street thought it was called that because we'd managed to write an album which would follow up 'Parklife', but that was the last thing I had in my head."

What's with the all the frilly undies and pervy stuff in 'Stereotypes' and 'My Robinson's Quango'?
"I'm not really very interested in underwear at all, but in the songs... I dunno. My aunt runs a B&B and she's convinced that 'Stereotypes' is about her so I just wanna say, for the record, it's got nothing to do with you, aunt. But with 'Mr Robinson's Quango', I went to see my grandparents in Grantham of all places and I was at the train station and I wanted to go to the toilet so I went and sat down and it had, in felt tip on the door; 'I'm wearing black French knickers under my suit/I've got stockings and suspenders on/I'm feeling rather loose' and that's where I took the whole song from. Just the idea that someone in Grantham, who was obviously a commuter to London, had sat there and written this thing! I thought it was wonderful. Hopefully that person will know they've been immortalised."

Do you really find him wonderful or is he just a bit sad?
"Well, he's a desperate character, a mayor or something, someone quite important who pinches his secretary's bum. A transvestite who takes drugs. A freemason. He's the man who has every skeleton in his closet. We could spent years dissecting him."

This is the end of the trilogy, isn't it? You can't do it again.
"I don't intend to. This is the last one."

What next?
"Oh, [something] very different. I suspect this LP will put us in a very advantageous position."

Not the quadruple concept album!
"Oh no, nothing like that. I'm a different kind of pop person now. I'm very pop. Hahahaha. I think the most satisfying thing about us is that we are on the cover of magazines like *Sugar* and *Big* and *Smash Hits* and *NME*. The whole spectrum. We get a look in everywhere. I don't ever wanna lose that." ■

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▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED January-May 1995 **▶RELEASED** September 11, 1995 **▶LABEL** Food **▶PRODUCER** Stephen Street **▶STUDIOS** Maison Rouge and Townhouse, London **▶LENGTH** 56:56

▶TRACKLISTING ▶Stereotypes 8 ▶Country House 4 ▶Best Days 9 ▶Charmless Man 7 ▶Fade Away 6 ▶Top Man 5 ▶The Universal 10 ▶Mr. Robinson's Quango 5 ▶He Thought Of Cars 8 ▶It Could Be You 5 ▶Ernold Same 6 ▶Globe Alone 7 ▶Dan Abnormal 6 ▶Entertain Me 7 ▶Yuko And Hiro 9

reat Escape

The fabulous folly that killed Britpop stone dead or a misunderstood masterpiece? Perhaps the final part of the 'Life' trilogy wasn't as bad as Damon told us it was

1995

According to Damon Albarn, "I've made two bad records; the first record, which is awful, and 'The Great Escape', which was messy." When even its chief architect is so quick to put the boot in, what hope can there be for the reputation of Blur's much-maligned fourth album? The reviews may have been gushing and the sales figures enormous (on its first week of release, it outsold the rest of the Top 10 combined), but 'The Great Escape' seems destined to be remembered as the moment when Blur jumped the shark by falling off a pig.

That fucking pig. It's not even the worst bit of the 'Country House' video, which endures today as a sweeping, panoramic vista of wrongness, the *Searchers* of shit promotional clips. You can take your pick of 'worst bits' from it, whether it's Damon's eminently punchable countenance as he blows bubbles with a coterie of models, the endless B-list celebrity cameos, or poor, depressed Graham Coxon, who wears the harrowed look of a Beckett protagonist trapped in a Benny Hill purgatory of his bandmates' making. "I ended up being a milkman in it," Coxon later winced. "If I'd done what I was supposed to have done I'd have to have had a lobotomy by now. It made me very unhappy."

When 'Country House' eventually beat 'Roll With It' to number one, the guitarist apparently contemplated throwing himself out of a sixth-floor window. With that in mind, it was probably inevitable that the album it was taken from would end up being tarnished by association. Yet for all its faults – it's at least three tracks too long, and has an unfortunate habit of veering into pastiche – 'The Great Escape' is a 'bad record' that still contains some of Blur's best songs; indeed, in the shape of 'The Universal', you could argue that it contains the best one they ever wrote. Even aside from that, there's also 'Best Days', a mournful elegaic ballad cut from the same cloth as the more-heralded 'End Of A Century' and 'Under The Westway', not to mention the gorgeous 'Yuko And Hiro', which brings the record to a close.

The biggest problem with 'The Great Escape' is its deeply entrenched idea of what a Blur album ought to be, a by-product of the Britpop wars where escalation was the only game in town. By standing their ground and attempting to rebottle the 'Parklife' lightning, Blur in effect found themselves regressing into a caricature of themselves, something Oasis wouldn't manage until the release of 'Be Here Now' the following year. It sounds like the work of a band desperately trying to convince everyone they're having the time of their lives, but it's hard to listen to songs like 'Top Man' or 'Mr Robinson's Quango' and not picture them quaffing champagne with the stewardesses while the autopilot arcs unnoticed into a nose-dive.

What ultimately redeems it, however, is the underlying cynicism that creeps into Albarn's songwriting. If 'Parklife' was a celebration of the working class, 'The Great Escape' was a sneer at the encroachment of the upper-middle; 'Charmless Man', for example, sounds almost eerily portentous of the gentrification of rock'n'roll we're currently suffering through, while the excellent 'Stereotypes' takes a peek behind the suburban facade to find boredom and desperation. Even the throwaway, Ken Livingstone-narrated 'Ernold Same' ("*His world stays the same/Today will always be tomorrow*") manages to convey the drear and tedium of a life spent doing anything but living.

As the conclusion to their loosely defined – but era-defining – 'Life' trilogy, 'The Great Escape' is admittedly more *The Godfather Part III* than *The Return Of The King*, and it did seem to mark the end of something. With it, Blur bowed out from the Britpop fray, only to return two years later having undergone a remarkable (and career-lengthening) reinvention, just as everybody else was running out of ideas. Much as they might wish they'd never made 'The Great Escape', you can't help but wonder if, on some level, they had to.

■ BARRY NICOLSON

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"We created a movement...

Putting the Oasis feud behind them (almost), in 1997 Blur laid the 'Life' cycle to rest and forged on into brave new waters on the band's first self-titled album. Damon spoke to NME's John Mulvey about his many changes of heart, making up with Graham by post and the voices in his head...

There'll always be a place for us"

He's been very well-behaved, has Damon Albarn. Here, tucked into the corner of a photographer's basement studio with all the make-up and mirrors and spare bits of furniture, he has talked very nicely about his new lifestyle, his new state of mind, his new record, even, and hardly mentioned that other band at all.

Yes, he has been honest, decent and calm... perhaps perfectly Zen, if you take his martial arts-trained and Icelandic sojourn-birthed new hippyisms at face value. He's talked about how ambition sometimes got the better of him in the past; about how he regrets, a little, how competitive he's been. Ostensibly, we are dealing with a reformed and slightly humbled character.

Earlier, his drummer, Dave Rowntree, describes the new, improved, less calculatingly controversial Blur. "In the past we've been guilty of making enormous headline-grabbing statements," he says, in his gentle and unflappable way. "We're not going to do that now. I think it's a sign of insecurity, looking back."

And Damon agrees unequivocally. Once a ⟶

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gobshite, not always a gobshite, it appears. Until...

We are discussing the new Blur single, 'Beetlebum', and its writer is happily admitting that, yes, it really is very reminiscent of a certain popular '60s combo. "I thought the most unfashionable thing for us to come back with was a song that sounded like The Beatles," he teases.

But 'Beetlebum' is not a moronically chirpy facsimile of The Beatles, nothing like the shallow, conservative takes on Merseybeat we've grown used to over the past year or so. No. 'Beetlebum' – in its harrowingly lovely harmonies, in its stealth, craft and insidiousness, in its slightly destabilising air of otherness – understands the true adventurous spirit of The Beatles. Pop music, for sure, but pop music with a brain that stretches our expectations of that polite little genre. Fine, just fine.

Then, unprovoked, he goes and does it:

"I want Noel to listen to 'Beetlebum' and realise that it is... closer," he seethes. "There's still no love lost between us. He'd wished I'd died of Aids, and he can go fuck himself, basically. It's not a musical thing or anything, but as a person he did something... I don't care if he apologised for it. He never apologised to me for it."

Do you think he ever will?

"No," he replies sharply. "I don't want him to."

Let's face it, he's really going to want to twat you now, isn't he?

He laughs. "He can try. I've got to keep the ante up for a little bit, haven't I? I can't turn into a complete fucking hippy. I've been pretty nice, but I haven't had a lobotomy. I haven't had my balls cut off..."

***"I don't believe in me/All I've ever done is tame/Will you love me all the same?" –* 'Strange News From Another Star'**

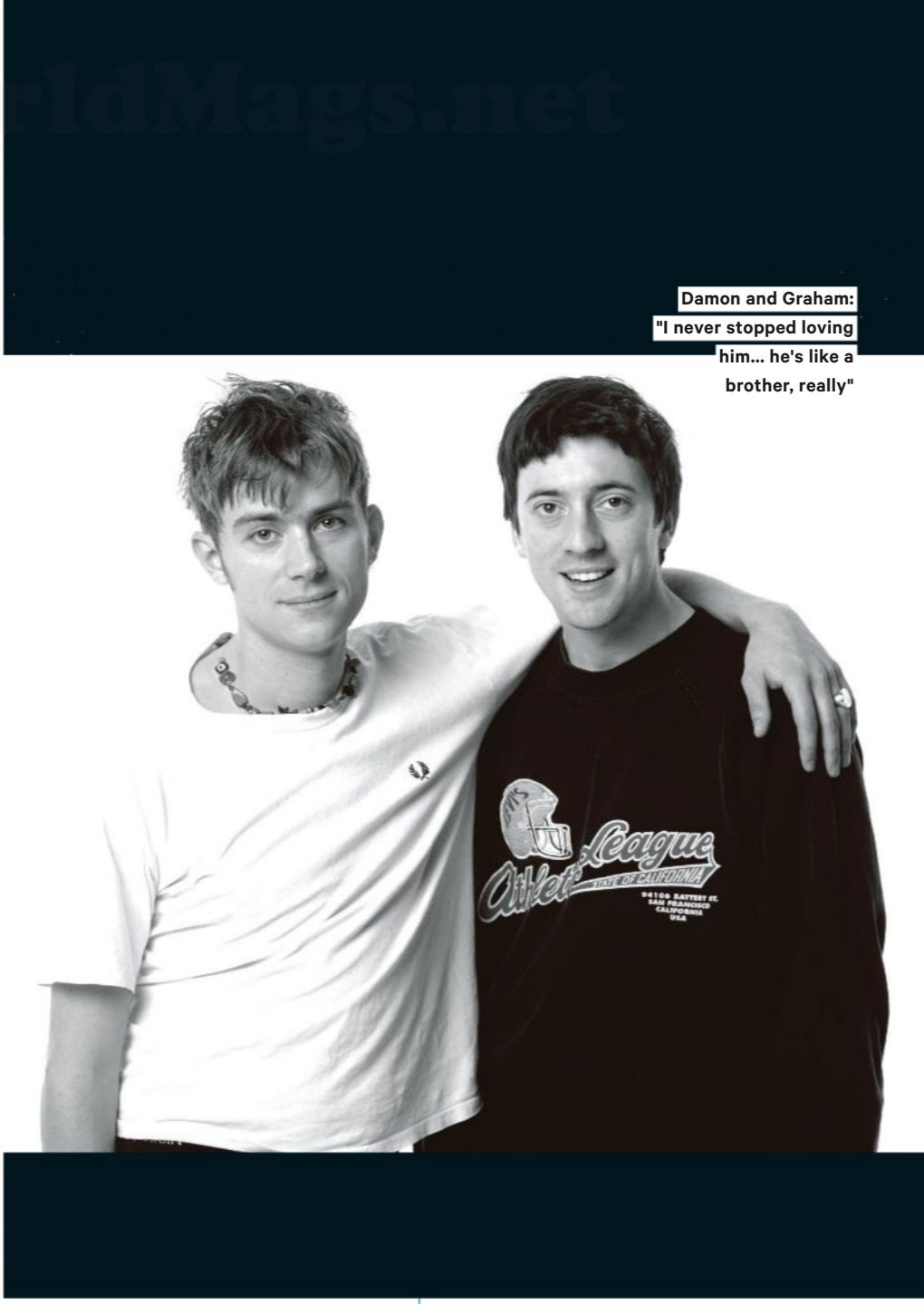
For most successful bands, the moment they become wilfully perverse, uncomfortably personal and, often, intensely self-pitying about the nature of fame is usually around the third album mark. Blur, however, have been much more resilient: they've waited until the fifth.

Sure, 'The Great Escape' harboured a certain emerging melancholy, as Damon started coming to terms with being depressed: after all, the first line written for the infamous Number One, 'Country House', often forgotten amid the prevailing corblimey knees-uppery, was, "*Blow, blow me out/I am so sad, I don't know why*". But when the final promotion of that album was finished last April, Blur began again.

For starters, there were relationships within the band that needed drastic repair jobs. Then there were new songs: written in the first person, unambiguously exploring Damon's severe disillusionment with fame and the indigenous musical revolution – yep, Britpop – that he inadvertently triggered. It was time, so he figured, to go against the grain again, to shake things up again, in the same way that 'Modern Life Is Rubbish' had inspired a generation to reject the prevailing grunge hegemony.

And so we come to Blur's fifth album – titled, with inscrutable reductivist logic, 'Blur'. It is, frankly, a remarkable album, although whether it represents a revolutionary step forward for the British mainstream or just plain old commercial suicide remains to be seen. Instead of wry, deceptively jolly vignettes à la 'Parklife', we're faced with brutally honest anatomisations of Damon's predicaments – sung in his own softer accent rather than the broad stage cockernee he's often adopted – and set to dark and frequently bizarre music.

As ever, the band have carried out a smash'n'grab raid on British musical history, although, crucially, the emphasis this time is on the moody innovators rather than the grinning traditionalists: more Bowie, Roxy and Tricky than music hall, Madness and The Small Faces, if you like. There's also a healthy dose of American influences, the very stuff Damon so enthusiastically sneered at in the past. The well-documented love of Pavement is there, but there are traces of Sonic Youth, too, in Graham Coxon's unfettered guitar-abusing and, with 'Song 2', a fabulously gonzoid Nirvana homage. Near the end, as the deep, droning Hoover noises kick in big style on 'Essex Dogs', we might as well be listening to some kind of mind-curdling slice of avant-garderie – a Tortoise spin-off project, maybe – on Chicago's unfeasibly cool Thrill Jockey label. When Damon says, "it's different," he's not joking. When he seems clearly, outrageously



Damon and Graham: "I never stopped loving him... he's like a brother, really"

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delighted with it, he's entirely right to be.

But anyway, that's for later. First, there's the little matter of the general public's stereotypes of Blur to slay – to set the scene for 'Blur'. Beginning with the notion that they, in the midst of 'Parklife', championed a British way of life rather than satirising it.

"It was always a celebration of the fall of a culture, as opposed to a resurgence," stresses Damon. "I've always said that. But I think I created such strong characters that I started to live in their shoes. 'Parklife' took me over a bit. It didn't worry me at the time, because it all felt good, y'know? It was all new and such virgin territory."

Do you regret a lot of the things you did around that time?

"Erm, I think I fell victim to some..." he pauses, starts again. "I made some silly decisions and I... I don't think I really had the sense of moral and personal responsibility that I have now."

Did ambition get the better of you?

"Yes," he says emphatically. "Well... I think everyone who's got to real icon status in this country has allowed ambition to get the better of them. We're through that and we're on to something else now, but I'm waiting to see everyone else get through it."

You mean Oasis?

"Well, Pulp as well."

You think that's happening to Jarvis now?

"I hope so, because I think he's got as screwed-up by it as I have. It's impossible to go all the way if you're intelligent. You can't believe in these things, that whole value system. I never had those values, I was just intrigued by the whole thing."

But that makes you sound like a dispassionate observer at superstar parties, when you were frequently pissed as a fart.

"Yeah, but I was never out of control... Well, that's not actually true. I was sort of out of control. I wasn't aware of what was going on, but now I am. It was just intriguing. You go to these parties because you're curious about what that kind of life is like. But just by being curious you end up being involved in it. You start off with a visit to (*names some flashy West End nightclub*) to score your coke, then go somewhere else, then back to (*that club again*), then off somewhere else again. That kind of scene draws you into the tabloids, because those places are where all the tabloids hang out."

Did you have a good time?

"In parts, yeah, but I also felt quite guilty because there was a voice that became stronger and stronger inside my head that was pulling me away from that. And this record is totally related to healing that.

"I went through shit. I got myself into such a state. I went from being a person who could sit under a tree and fall asleep, to someone who could not sit under a tree, and now I'm back to someone who can. And for me that is the most valuable thing in the world to be able to do, to be able to have that direct, unaffected peace."

"Under the pressure/Gone middle of the road/Fall into fashion/Fall out again/We stick together/'Cos it never ends" – 'MOR'

Nowadays, Damon Albarn is a strange, albeit beguiling, mixture of confidence and penitence – "a mixed up fucker, really," as he puts it. The old bullishness is still there, of course, especially when he talks about his new record. But, simultaneously, there's a sense that one of the new record's key functions is to atone for past sins. To restore a sense of dignity to proceedings. To remind people that, beyond the tabloid-friendly displays of bravado, quite a bit of brain was actually at work. But this is a man, remember, whose last appearance on a British stage was just over a year ago, dragged up as that well-known symbol of the revolutionary intelligentsia, the pantomime dame.

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"That was the end of something, very much," he accepts. "We'd taken it as far as we could do and feel comfortable. I have a real love of music hall and that whole tradition, it's something I love and feel very akin to. Looking back on it, the cartoon side of 'The Great Escape' and 'Parklife' would make a brilliant musical. Put them on the West End stage and 'Country House' would bring the house down. And that's where it should be.

"But it doesn't satisfy a growing part of my psyche. You just can't help to realise, as you get a little older, that you're not that important, and you need to make things count a lot more: I don't mean count in a classic pop single way, I mean count in a way of learning about yourself.

"I suppose I saw everything in a vaguely cartoon way, and that's why we made cartoon music. But there've always been hints, on every single record, of what this record is: things like 'Sing' on 'Leisure'. It's always been there. In our minds, it doesn't seem odd to have made this kind of departure."

Was it designed to alienate pop fans?

"No. It was the only thing we could possibly make without having just stopped and gone our separate ways. I feel Graham had gone a long way with me. I've known him for so long that I couldn't not be sensitive to his... I write good songs and I have a different kind of musical sense to him, and when the two are put together properly it's really, really strong. But sometimes one overtakes the other. We really tried on this record to make a balance.

"We'd taken it as far as we could do and feel comfortable. I have a real love of music hall and that whole tradition, it's something I love and feel very akin to"
Damon Albarn

"He's growing up as well. We just happened to make a leap at the same time. And him giving up drinking was massively important, because it returned our relationship to what it used to be and I could communicate with him. I got really frustrated and upset... I never stopped loving him like... well he's like a brother, really. Yeah, I just got very frustrated, because it was impossible to be rational."

Did you feel the band was stalling because of that breakdown?

"Yeah. I'm not blaming it on that, but towards the end of 'The Great Escape' it was getting virtually impossible to plan anything or know exactly how the next day would turn out."

He laughs hopelessly. The way 'Blur' has turned out, however, is – one suspects – like the record Graham Coxon always wanted to make. Always a startlingly odd, dissonant ⇢

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guitarist given the chance – check his angularly 'anti-rock' solo on, of all things, 'Country House', it is as if Damon and producer Stephen Street have finally given him the go-ahead to run atonal riot across the songs. Thus there is much feedback. There are many clangs. And there is the unmistakable sound of a very happy man meticulously getting away with murder for the first time in his career.

For a while over last summer, though, he and Damon could barely communicate.

"We wrote letters to each other after we toured," Graham remembers. "It was easier to write; we got everything straight like that. We'd recount incidents on tour where it had got a little too much, where it seemed quite possible we could never be friends again. There weren't any arguments, but something would trigger someone to shout and scream, and then there'd be silence."

"It was a good way of starting again," explains Damon, of the letters. "That's just what happens in bands, that's what happens if you spend months and months relying on someone to be responsible and them relying on you to communicate with them and be sensitive to how they feel."

"I was finding it increasingly difficult to play along with the cartoon persona. My true self had to come out, because the tabloids were really trying to destroy it"

Damon Albarn

"This is the music/And we're movin' on, we're movin' on" – 'Movin' On'

There are, at the very least, two ways to look at 'Blur'. On the one hand, it's an enormously brave record: a kick in the face to the Britpop monster they created, a fearless bid to stay creatively potent whatever the commercial repercussions. On the other hand, it's an enormously cowardly record: a retreat from the battlefield, an admission that Blur can't compete with Oasis on the terms they once set themselves, an acceptance of failure...

"Hmmm," ponders Damon. "Y'see, that's not how I see it really."

But you can understand why people might see it that way?

He pauses. "Yeah... but... having got to a point where you sell millions of records and sell out stadiums – OK, not huge stadiums but medium-sized stadiums – I think you're entitled to... reassess things. Because we've achieved what most bands will never achieve as far as status is concerned. We created a movement: as far as the lineage of British bands goes, there'll always be a place for us.

"So I think we genuinely started to see the world in a slightly different way. And it did become blatantly clear to me that, at the end of the day, it's got to be the records and nothing else – that the status and record sales are not as important as the records. That is just a fact you can't escape from."

Justine said in last week's *NME* that you still believe your music could change the world.

"Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I'd hate to lose that. I'd chop me head off if I did that. But I don't think you can tell people how. It's worked in the past, I have to say. And I know how to do it that way, but I just want to change myself again. I always knew we'd make a record like this. I knew what we were. I think you have to be very careful because 'knowing' stuff is interpreted as being clinical and detached."

And a lot of this record is composed of the things you used to rail against?

"Yeah, I'm very aware of the contradictions..."

Self-pitying whingeing up its own arse with silly noises over the top, a complete absolving of commercial responsibility...

"Yes," he smiles ruefully, "but you could say that about The Beatles. They were doing that towards the end of their career. I think English bands don't take enough risks once they've got a formula together. And that's why The Beatles are the best band of all time, because they did do that. It's just a forgotten art. That's why it's depressing at the moment.

"And that's why we haven't made a shiny pop record, because the environment is the opposite of what it was when we were making shiny pop records. We have our own integrity, and that's what keeps us strong and what keeps us together, and it doesn't always fit in with the present wisdom of what is cool and what is not cool."

Welcome, then, Damon Albarn, mystic, calm Zen master. With the odd notable exception, the headline-grabbing vitriol has gone, the boundless energy channelled into healthier pursuits. Some might say his edge has gone. Others might conclude he's got a life.

"I do martial arts, tae kwon do," he says. "That's been quite important. Once you start to really get involved, your desire to mouth off diminishes. It just teaches you that that is not the way to be. It's not training to be a killer... I mean, when I went for my first grading last year, I was a white belt and I had to go there with lots of young people. Virtually everyone in the room knew who I was and you have to call everyone 'sir', so it's a very humbling experience.

"And I've spent some money and bought a house in Iceland. When I get back I'm always so chilled out and open-minded. I think anyone who spends time out of London feels like that."

Are you sick of London?

"Yeah, I don't want to live here any more, really, I just don't want to live in a city any more. Justine loves it, so I haven't got a great deal of choice, but I really miss being able to just walk and be quiet, things like that."

Then it figures that 'Blur' is all about you, rather than about London and the suburbs and the characters that fill it – it's easily the most blatantly personal and exposed, in fact, that you've ever been.

"Yeah," he concurs, "it doesn't worry me now, because I'm more equipped emotionally to deal with it. But you've got

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A zen-like Damon shot in 1997: "I'm more equipped, emotionally..."

LFI/MIKE DRIVER, CAMERA PRESS/RICHARD FAULKS

to be careful when you start singing about yourself. Songs have a magic to them, they have a sort of power that you can't mess around with. If you sing about things they tend to come true, because the fact that you've even written about them means that, deep down inside, you know that's where you're going to end up. There's examples all the way of people who've written about their own future, so it's quite scary."

Were you suppressing the urge to write directly about yourself?

"Yeah, definitely. But I just needed to. I got to the point where I had to."

There's a song on the B-side of 'Beetlebum' called 'All My Life' that is, perhaps, more painfully autobiographical than anything even on 'Blur'. Left off the album because, Damon claims, it sounds too much like 'old' Blur, its killer melancholic line is, "*England my love, you make me look like a fool*". Do you resent the fact that you used England, and then, much more ruthlessly, it used you?

"Well, I suppose so," he sighs, "but it was inevitable once all the tabloid demons came out and it became north/south, working class/middle class. Up until that point, everything was different. At that point, I found it increasingly difficult to play along with the cartoon persona, and my true self had to come out because they were really trying to destroy it."

Here he is, then, the most unfashionable man in pop, progenitor of a '90s musical renaissance and, more recently, its most conspicuous victim – and still, if the truth be told, a bit full of himself. This is the way, it seems, that Damon Albarn likes it again: to be in a position where he can subversively kick over the statues rather than triumphantly sit aloft them. "It's very important for us to sometimes feel that everybody misunderstands us and that we've let ourselves down," he says.

Perhaps Damon Albarn, at heart, would love to make good records – 'Blur' is, undoubtedly, a terrific one – and be a boring dullard in interviews. The trouble is, he just can't do it. See, he can boldly cast off all the other affections of superficial superstardom but, well, once a gobshite...

"The thing with Oasis is over," he says as the session wraps up, returning unprompted to the subject of his bêtes noires. "The bands are destined to do very different things. I think they did us a huge favour... But..."

And his timing is impeccable, his gift for the grand gesture not disappeared completely, his grin just as bring-'em on mischievous... "But I'll still twat him!" ■

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Blur

1997

Scrubbing off cartoon geezerdom with an abrasive, exhilarating overhaul secured Blur a post-Britpop future

One Saturday in June 1996, Blur, Stephen Street and engineer John Smith flew to Iceland on Pulp's plane to begin working in earnest on their fifth album. A few hours earlier, they'd debuted two new tracks – 'Song 2' and 'Chinese Bombs' – to a Dublin crowd who'd raised the roof for them. Spring 1996 was a pivotal yet quite sticky time in the life of Britain's best-loved band/most-reviled pop muppets. All over, the seams of the band they had been were splitting, and now, with only half a notion of what they might become, they were setting off to the very fringes of the northern hemisphere: to a weird land of lumpy volcanic earth and lunar hot springs, where Damon had enjoyed a very pleasant holiday a few months earlier, and where he now hoped they'd find the peace they needed to achieve this rebirth.

In April of that year, Stephen Malkmus had come to stay at Damon and Justine Frischmann's house. Now, Malkmus' band, Pavement, were going to be residing inside the DNA of a group determined to shed their luvverly-jubberly image at almost any cost.

It was time to pull the ripcord on Britpop, and being pin-ups, once and for all. 'The Great Escape' had won them the battle, via 'Country House', but lost them the war, via selling in one year in America what '(What's The Story) Morning Glory' sold in one week. As a consequence, inside the Blur camp, a certain kind of paranoia – self-loathing, even – was starting to take hold.

"Any time I would go into a shop," Damon later recalled. "Any time, they would start playing Oasis. This happened for years..." As Graham's drinking, Dave's marriage break-up and Alex's general '90s playboying had spun them all in different directions, the vibe had become one of siege mentality. The band themselves were distant at best, no longer maintaining the same friends, or even living in the same quadrant of London. Out of that mess and sadness, they found themselves following the new trail of the US indie and alt.rock bands Graham initially started listening to in order to piss off the rest of the group – to deliberately pour cold custard on the wistful Kinks/Small Faces Merrie Olde Englande cliche they'd become.

The results showed all the difference pre-publicity can make. When Oasis' 'Be Here Now' came out six months later, it was trailed as their defining statement, and consequently became almost impossible to live up to. Blur's record on the other hand, was talked up by its label as a sidestep, a piece of commercial semi-suicide. Hence, lead single 'Beetlebum' wasn't expected to do much business. So when it went straight in at Number One, it somehow felt like the triumph of an underdog: that they had brilliantly managed to ram-raid the cultural conversation yet again.

Though there was initially a sales lull, with the battering ram of 'Song 2' as second single the public caught up to the new headspace, and overnight learned to forget Blur The Colchester Cartoon Fops, by embracing the vision we now take as standard: Blur the ultimate Beatles-like, Bowie-esque rock chameleons. 'Look Inside America' – ironically the most English thing on the record – showed brilliantly how you could at once make a statement about shucking off your old identity and embracing everything you had professed to be against, while still drowning it in the very British brown sauce of ironising and rude observations about a land of "*cooking knives and suicide*".

Of course, sneakily enough, Damon hadn't actually made the sort of album any number of Steve Albini-sanctified hairy chord-chuggers might make. Sure, the textures were all there: the no-fi fizz of 'Chinese Bombs', Graham's tin-can recording of 'You're So Great', the white-out filthy industrial scuzz of 'I'm Just A Killer For Your Love' and 'Essex Dogs', and the Pavement-friendly ironic honky-tonk of 'Country Sad Ballad Man'. But this was still the work of an essentially English songwriter with a craftsman's eye for style and genre. Loose the guitar work often is, accidental or haphazard it most certainly isn't. On the contrary, 'Blur' is the result of a finely-honed pop band moving into slack-rock and elevating it to a science. All history seems inevitable in the end; we don't now much remember the doubts, conflict and paranoia that fed into Blur's decisive break. All we see from this distance is a brilliant bit of dummy-passing, the moment where a group wrong-footed everyone and thereby, in one seemingly effortless leap, elevated their status from best of their era to best of all time. That's hindsight for you.

GAVIN HAYNES

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It was time to shed their image, to pull the ripcord on Britpop, and being pin-ups

▶THE DETAILS

▶**RECORDED** June-November 1996 ▶**RELEASED** February 10, 1997 ▶**LABEL** Food ▶**PRODUCERS** Stephen Street/Blur ▶**STUDIOS** Maison Rouge, Mayfair and 13, London; Stúdíó Grettisgat, Reykjavik ▶**LENGTH** 57:01 ▶**TRACKLISTING** ▶Beetlebum 9 ▶Song 2 10 ▶Country Sad Ballad Man 7 ▶MOR 8 ▶On Your Own 8 ▶Theme From Retro 5 ▶You're So Great 8 ▶Death Of A Party 7 ▶Chinese Bombs 6 ▶I'm Just A Killer For Your Love 6 ▶Look Inside America 7 ▶Strange News From Another Star 10 ▶Movin' On 6 ▶Essex Dogs 7

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"It was a hi I nearly went mad..."

Caught in the maelstrom of his first ever major break-up, Damon Albarn spilled his guts to Steven Wells over the trials and tribulations that created '13', while Graham laid into intellectual laddism and 'ironic' Britpop Blur

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"THE RECORD IS A CELEBRATION – I SEE IT AS A PROTRACTED FAREWELL"

DAMON ALBARN

ut of context but fun – it's Blur in crisis! "Are you really doing this interview about how the album is Damon's catharsis?" snarls Graham, suspiciously.

"It's like I can talk for hours and it's really interesting stuff and then I read the article and it's – Damondamondamondamon damondamondamon – and then this tiny quote from Dave," says Dave.

"Before the last album I felt like I was running ahead through a forest of crap," says Graham.

"I know that the last album was our biggest seller ever and that 'Song 2' was like this huge international selling record, but I never felt I was ever right in there," says Damon.

"Damon's not an easy person to like," says Graham.

"Alex is easy to like but he's very easy to despise as well," says Graham.

"It's very easy to think of Alex as a complete spoilt snob," says Graham.

"Fat Les?" smiles Dave, rolling his eyes.

Listen, kids, word in the biz is that Graham hates Damon and Damon hates Alex and Alex hates Damon and Damon hates Graham. And so does Dave. And let's not forget that Alex hates Dave. And Graham too, probably. And they're going to split up. Soon. Really soon. So, no change there then.

Nah, hey! Come on, where's your sense of humour? WE'RE ONLY KIDDING! Graham's right, this is gonna be about the album Damon wrote when he got chucked by Justine. There are a million bog-standard 'Boo-Hoo, My Bird's Left Me!' pop songs, but 'No Distance Left To Run', the penultimate track on the new Blur album '13', isn't one of them. It's open-heart surgery. Every line throbs with the pain of emotional bereavement. Blur are onstage at a 'secret' gig at an Oxford college. Damon has his eyes closed. All the usual cocky bounce gone. "*And I can't go back, let it flow, let it flow/I sleep alone/I sleep alone…/That's just the way it is/That's just the way it is*". It's painful. And it's delivered against a rising hubbub of "woo-hoos!" and, from a rugby-shirted male voice choir by the bar, the repeated first chorus of 'Parklife'.

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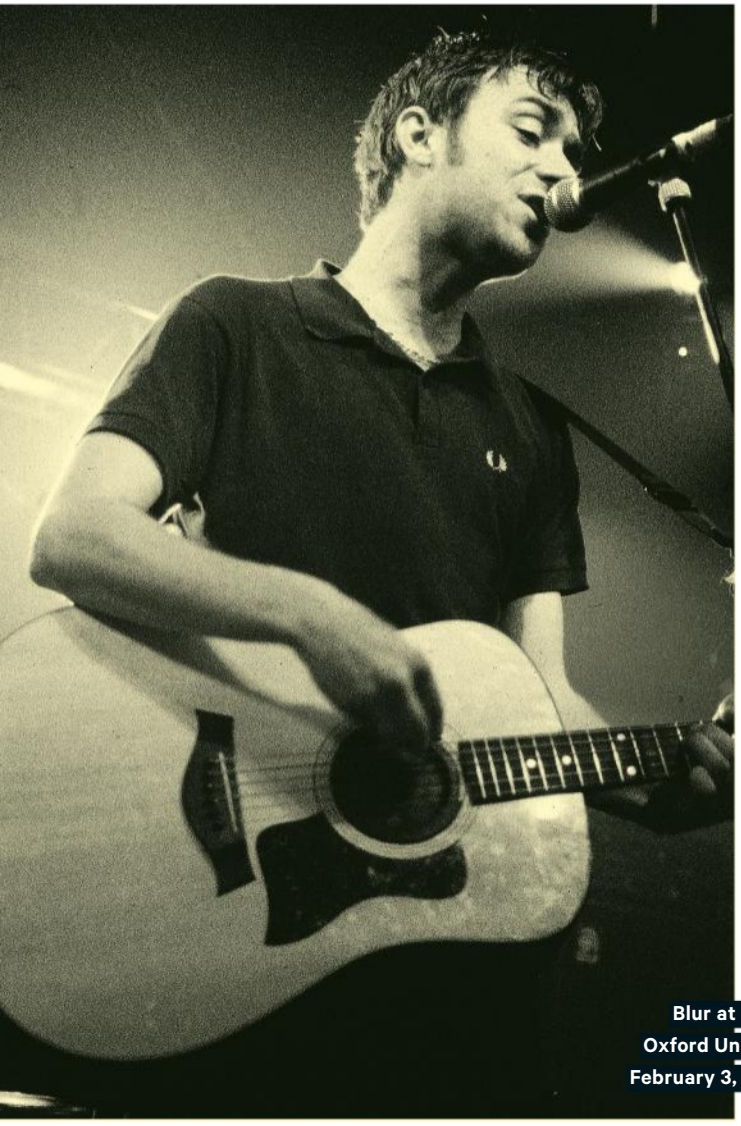
We meet Graham the day after in one of the many Camden pubs where Blur built their unenviable reputations as Oliver Reed-lite pissheads. "I think being a student is very strange," he says. "You're very conscious of how people are thinking of you. Yeah, reinvention."

On the subject on reinvention, Graham, surely that's one of the main functions of rock'n'roll? But these days you've got to be '4 Real' and any reinvention, artifice or playfulness is dismissed as 'unauthentic'. And surely Blur have always been a quintessentially unauthentic band…

"What – because it's easier to be who you're meant to be and it's harder to be somebody else, you mean? It's more interesting to be someone else. But Damon's great big thing, and that always bothered me, was that it was all 'theatre'. His whole bloody music-hall thing. His private jokes that nobody else gets. That got us in such a mess by the end of the blatant pop records, by the end of 'The Great Escape'. Perhaps I've always tried to be as normal as possible – I couldn't take it seriously. I couldn't be like Keith Richards because I always think he's looked completely daft…"



Blur at their Oxford Uni gig, February 3, 1999

Shy, bespectacled Graham first saw Damon onstage at school assembly, singing 'Gee, Officer Krupke' from *West Side Story*.

"I thought, 'My god! That boy! He was really going for it – full on! He was like he was already there. He was a star, y'know? And then I bumped into him by the music block and he had these real rude-boy brogues, the ones that were dear, and I had these, like, worker's, fat and acid-resistant ones and I was fucking proud of them. And he was like, 'Them, they're fucking rubbish brogues! They're the fucking cheap shit! Look, I've got the proper ones on.'" And he was looking at his reflection in the glass, doing his hair constantly while he was telling me I was basically as low as a dog compared to him. And then he walked off, leaving me feeling even smaller than I did already."

You get the feeling that if Blur were the Spice Girls then Damon would be Ginger, Scary, Sporty AND Baby. And Graham would be, well, Graham. And desperately wishing he was in another band.

OK, FF 18 years to the Oxford gig. Blur are back onstage for the encore and trotting effortlessly through the tubthumpingly awesome punkgrungeheavymetalterrace-anthem 'Song 2'. And the students who yakked through the gut-wrenching new stuff are lapping it up, giving the band their full attention for the first time since they got bored halfway through 'Swamp Song' half-an-hour ago. Whoo fucking hoo. Pearls before swine? Yeah, well maybe.

But this is Blur remember? The cheekily ironic art-school prankster chappies with the lopsided grin, the skewed worldview and the crafty sideswipes at life's amusing little absurdities? What ho! And there's Damon sobbing his guts up – the rubber-boned Jack-In-The-Box of pissed-to-fuck po-mo pop – and all of a sudden we're supposed to take him seriously? Duh! What the fuck! Category error!

They've done it again. They've hopped genres. They've zigged when they should have zagged. In a pop world chocka with one-trick ponies, the aptly named Blur move. There's nothing remotely cheesy or 'ironic' about '13'. And that's deliciously ironic, if you think about it.

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"OK, yeah, but it's a different kind of irony," says Damon. "OK – so we can still talk about Blur and irony. So the world is still as it should be – ha ha ha ha ha!"

Damon is hungover to hell, slumped on a sofa, sucking on a snaffled Silk Cut and squinting in the bright photo-studio light.

Are you over the process of grieving?

"Yeah. I mean, yeah yeah yeah. Yeah, I'm getting on with my life. Completely. But you can't live with someone and have such an interactive career and emotional relationship without, y'know – it follows me around all the time. Every time I talk to anyone, her name's mentioned so it's not something which I can disentangle myself from that easily..."

So you're grieving but at the same time you're talking your tiny bollocks off about the songs that you wrote when you were grieving. That must feel peculiar.

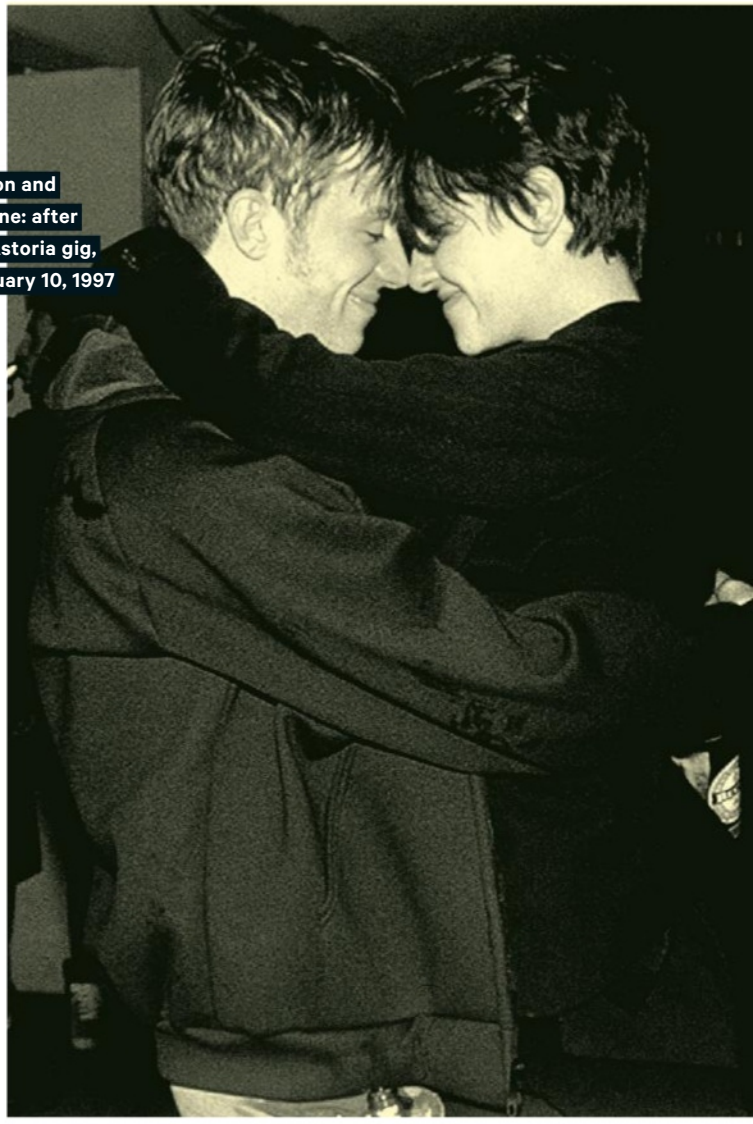
"Yeah, it's new. The whole thing is uncharted territory but I've got nothing to hide or lose so I don't feel defensive. Ultimately the record is a celebration. I see it as a protracted farewell."

How many times in your life have you been through a serious break-up?

"It's the first time. But I'll tell you what it's done to me – I think you have to have been broken-hearted properly to actually really start to get to grips with it. I feel music so much more now. And that's what this album's about – those degrees of separation. And the longer it takes the more painful it gets... I've learned to separate what I think from my music. My music is a heartfelt thing now, rather than a head thing. Maybe that's what the split with Justine was all about. I've managed to find my music and still managed to keep my personality intact."

It's odd that Blur seem to have stopped commenting on 'Englishness' just as things have started to get really interesting. If you look at footage of Pre-Blair, Pre-Dead Di, Pre-Hoddle Britain – it's like a foreign country. It's like looking at an Ealing comedy or a '50s newsreel.

"Yeah, the country's changed. That's what I felt on 'Modern Life Is Rubbish', I felt things were changing really rapidly. Those records were really angry. They probably don't sound it but they were, they were very awkward and very... I dunno, it must have some similarity to punk in the sense that it was angry and it got completely misinterpreted and got turned into something very commercial. 'The Great Escape' was just too bitter for its own good. It was just too cynical. But we felt that Britain was sinking. In the sense that what we'd grown up with as a culture was just disappearing, was just



Damon and Justine: after the Astoria gig, February 10, 1997

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being obliterated. And that's what those songs were about – cheerfully nihilistic. But the whole thing got completely hijacked by Labour, by the music business, by everything."

"Youth culture died in 1979 when Thatcher got in," states Graham, halfway through his second pint of geezer-style lager-top.

Surely it was The Smiths that killed it?

"Well, that was for the delicate people..."

Who have now taken over.

"But they haven't! Now, because *The Guardian* say it's alright to like football, everybody's drinking beer and saying 'birds'. So it's OK to drink loads of beer, say 'bird' and watch football but only if you think about it. It's like – do you know why you drink beer? Do you know why you say 'bird'? Do you get an intellectual kick out of going to football? Do you know what's going on? And they'll all go 'YUH! Get 'em in!' – and it's so fucking trendy."

Exactly what you were accused of when you were goin' dahn ver dogs.

"Well, yeah, but I went down there 'cos Andy [Ross, Blur's label boss at Food] has always done that. It's nice. I like dogs. And I like it all being taken so seriously by these men and women who are dripping in fucking gold and eating their scampi and chips and it's a posh night out and it's just simple pleasures, isn't it?"

So are you happy with the fact that this is going to be seen as Damon's grief album?

"I dunno, really, none of us have an easy time all of the time. I wasn't thinking of Damon's emotional state of mind when I was putting my fingers across my fretboard particularly. He's showing a vulnerable side rather than his cocky thing. So I don't want him to do with his vulnerable side what he does with his cocky side. Getting himself into a lot of bother blabbing too much."

Given the British public's fondness for underdogs and its distaste for cocky upstarts, in marketing terms, rolling over and showing the vulnerable side might be considered a brilliant move.

"I'm a complainer and I think I've always been a complainer. I've always said I'm pissed off and I've always said I'm depressed and I think you do get more support if you're like that. Maybe Damon's trying a Graham, I dunno. I don't know what I'm talking about. But if you're talking about stuff like that – about being chucked – everybody knows what that feels like – I think Damon's feeling more confident to be vulnerable, whereas maybe before he thought it was a weakness."

But it sounds like, 18 years and six albums later, you've still not resolved that tension that you first felt when he slagged your cheapo brogues. Would you ever want to?

"No, probably not, it's not bad tension between me and Damon, it's just like any kind of double act really. The nasty bastard cocky fucker and the bloke who's really friendly and warm – and that's kind of what me and Damon are like. But we interchange because sometimes I can be bloody nasty and poisonous and he can be really nice."

"I THINK THAT DAMON'S FEELING MORE CONFIDENT TO BE VULNERABLE"

GRAHAM COXON

Something I've always wanted to ask – the 'Country House' video. When you were lying in a bath full of asses' milk having Joanne Guest polish your nipples, what was going through your head?

"Dunno, my epitaph, probably – 'Not sleeping, just stone-cold fucking dead.'"

Graham still squirms at the memory of 'ironic' Blur – "the bloody music hall thing".

"It was a hideous, hideous time – I nearly went bloody mad."

He wasn't the only one.

"That whole Britpop think really re-established the whole class system in a very, very frightening way," says Damon. "It polarised people's opinions, mainly because the two bands expressed themselves so crassly... But it still fucks me off how we were portrayed as posh. I mean I've spent my whole life with people trying to put me in my place. I think we are a really classless band. I know that's probably a really naive and stupid thing to say, but I think we've learnt some very tough lessons in our 10 years together and naturally it's evolved into this record."

But you've gotta be glad he fucked up. It made pop *matter*, gave us a slew of witty urban-folk singles in the tradition of The Jam and The Kinks and then forced Blur into making two quantum leap killer albums and none of that would have happened if Damon had learnt to keep his big mouth shut. ■

RANKIN, ANDY WILLSHER, LPI

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▶THE DETAILS

▶**RECORDED** June-October 1998 ▶**RELEASED** March 15, 1999 ▶**LABEL** Food ▶**PRODUCER** William Orbit ▶**STUDIO** Mayfair and Sarm West, London; Studio Sýrland, Reykjavik ▶**LENGTH** 66.50 ▶**TRACKLISTING** ▶Tender 9 ▶Bugman 9 ▶Coffee & TV 9 ▶Swamp Song 6 ▶1992 8 ▶BLUREMI 6 ▶Battle 9 ▶Mellow Song 7 ▶Trailerpark 6 ▶Caramel 10 ▶Trimm Trabb 10 ▶No Distance Left To Run 9 ▶Optigan 1 6

'13' was Blur's pre-millennial attempt at making, essentially, a blues album

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As Damon let go of Justine, an increasingly fractious Blur let go of all musical preconceptions to create their most startlingly vulnerable album

If 1997's 'Blur' was an attempt to take the band into new territory after the Britpop era had run its course, it didn't quite succeed. Scuzzy and ramshackle it may have been compared to the 'Life' trilogy's polished pop, but it still possessed enough melodic nous to keep it identifiably Blur. In fact, the ubiquity of the throwaway 'Song 2' at sports events finally gave them a modicum of success in the former enemy territory of America.

The band, and Damon in particular, were still determined to push things into ever-weirder territory though, something which Albarn, with his constantly twitching cultural antennae, would have been acutely aware was necessary to stay relevant in a world which now contained 'OK Computer'. They even ditched long-term producer Stephen Street, preferring to use the fresh approach of William Orbit, who let the band jam before digitally editing the results and adding all kinds of wonky sonic armoury. Unfortunately things were breaking down in the group, as well as in Damon's personal life. The band have since readily admitted that they were struggling to get along, Coxon becoming increasingly alienated as a result of his drinking. Indeed, '13' proved to be the last record with his long-term cohorts that Coxon, who had already released a solo album, saw through until its completion. Plus, recording coincided with Damon's break-up with long-term partner Justine Frischmann, and his heartbreak over the split (and perhaps, to a lesser extent, his foundering friendship with Coxon) informs the whole record, giving it a loose concept about love and loss. Damon's litany of Colin Zeals and Ernold Sames were jettisoned; this time he'd put himself, starkly lit, centre stage.

In spite of all the bad vibes, the results were startling. The recordings, taking place mainly in the band's studio (which gave the album its title) but also Albarn's new favourite country of Iceland, revealed a markedly different sound, while at the same time getting as close as Blur ever did to their art-school roots. Lengthy opening track 'Tender' set the tone, its tune and feel bearing a strong similarity to Lennon's 'Give Peace A Chance' and its gospel flavourings clearly indebted to Spiritualized's 'Ladies And Gentlemen We Are Floating In Space', another acclaimed recent album built from the bare bones of break-up and breakdown. Sung by both Albarn and Coxon, the lyrics made clear Albarn's helplessness and desperation for spiritual healing, scratching at some kind of solace and reaffirmation that "*love's the greatest thing*". Elsewhere, his pain was most evident in the gloomy ache of 'No Distance Left To Run', where he stated that he "*won't kill myself trying to stay in your life*" over Coxon's beautifully sparse guitar. The mood darkened further on the proggy, Floydian soundscapes of the lurching 'Battle' and the dense, dreamlike 'Caramel', whose central lyric ("*I gotta get better, I love you forever*") again betrayed Albarn's drained and desolate mindset. And on the likes of 'Bugman', '1992' and the imperious 'Trimm Trabb' the band got to exorcise their frustrations by bashing out a frenzied squall clearly encouraged by Orbit's more loose, experimental approach to sound. You'd have never seen this coming from the cheeky chappies of Ally Pally and Mile End.

There were moments of light relief – the stupidly punky 'BLUREMI', the skewed trip-hop of 'Trailerpark' and, most notably, Coxon's chugging, charming ode to inertia 'Coffee & TV' (bolstered by a hugely popular video featuring an adorable animated milk carton) offered a little respite from the pervading gloom. But on the whole '13', which divided opinion on release, was Blur's pre-millennium attempt at making, essentially, a blues album. It's tempting to suggest that labelmates Radiohead took inspiration when making their own 'Kid A' a year later but as the next decade wore on its widening of the parameters of what might be considered 'indie rock' made deeper and deeper incisions. '13''s brash, pioneering spirit and sombre feel was surely noticed by Thom Yorke and co, while the likes of The Horrors and MGMT have clearly taken elements from its unique sound. No wonder – it's Blur's most honest and human record and, ironically, in many ways their most loveable.

■ ALAN WOODHOUSE

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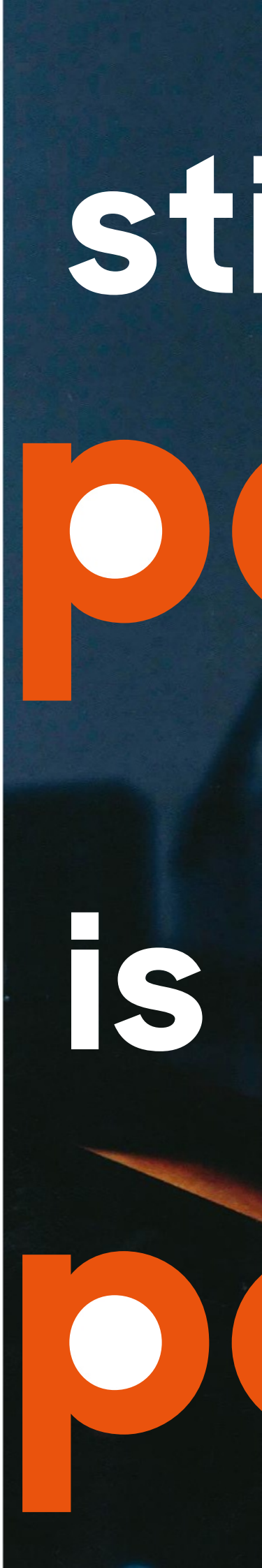

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With Graham absent, having been ejected from the band after missing most of the 'Think Tank' sessions, a three-piece Blur hit Coachella in 2003 to launch the album on the Yanks – and, in Damon's case at least, get too tanked up to think. Mark Beaumont yanks his chain

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There's a beast on the hunt around Coachella. Half a barrel of vodka broke open its cage and now it's bounding through the artists' enclosure. Past the circle of sycophants sniffing Cameron Diaz's skirt hem. Past The Charlatans' Tim Burgess taking on The Libertines at shuffleboard. Past a conversation that goes: "Hello, my name is Howlin' Pelle Almqvist." "Hey, they call me Snoop." And sniffing for *NME* blood. Out in the guests' area it dodges a come-on from one of The Donnas ("Hey, your set was so great...") and lunges for the main arena.

"Sir," says an armed cop at the gate sternly, "please use the appropriate exit."

DAFAHKYAMEANYAFACKINGCANNT!!"

The beast goes for the jugular – but with no fear for the consequences, Damon Albarn's minder Smoggy leaps into his path, bundling Damon backwards with his chest. "It's not worth it!" he hisses as the cop goes for his Mace. "He's a policeman and *he's got a gun*!"

"But I can't believe that fuckin' bloke!" Albarn argues, chin squared, fists up. "I hate that about American festivals! All this fuckin' authority!"

In a day of protecting Blur at Palm Springs' Coachella festival, Smoggy has only actually had to protect Damon from himself. Without Graham Coxon around to pick fights with his own reflection, with Alex James having swapped his three-bottles-of-Moët-a-day habit – according to conservative estimates Alex has blown a million on champagne since 1991 – for the more genteel pursuits of painting and yoga, you take more notice of how Damon, Blur's only remaining drinker, is such a gloriously unpredictable drunk.

Rewind half an hour and Blur are a vision of ragged charm and sophistication, relaxing in the fruitskin-and-Dorito-dip wreckage of their Winnebago after a brave and brilliant 'Think Tank'-centric twilight set. (Damon, onstage: "These songs were recorded in a desert, so it's nice to play them in another one.") They're all jetlagged and struck down with the taco squits that have blighted the camp since their recent visit to Mexico City as part of a continent-hopping promotional tour. Alex makes a quick buggy jaunt with *NME* to watch Queens Of The Stone Age, shakes off a couple of goth girls pleading for the address of his hotel and heads for bed with a passing quip – "Festivals are just the acceptable face of stadium rock. Hneeear!" In five days he marries video producer Claire Neate in London and there's still the stag do to organise, the flower girls to dress and half the Groucho to invite. He and drummer Dave Rowntree hop the 9.30pm bus offsite, leaving only Damon to play genial host and cocktail-maker to the stars (like Tim Burgess, who pops in for a vodka cranberry). Eschewing recent fashion errors that would have had Trinny and whatserface gagging on their Yves St Laurent maternity corsets – the tweed-capped rag'n'bone man and bling-laden bovver rapper 'looks' to name just two – he's decked out in a circa-'Modern Life Is Rubbish' suit. He looks healthy and svelte, has the hair of 10 Molkos, and is charming and cheerful to a fault.

Half a gallon of vodka later, however, he's the Britpop Patrick Bateman: friendly and intense of manner but with eyes of sheer, bloody murder. He decides to take your correspondent on an hour-long trawl of the festival site in search of *NME*'s Steve Sutherland to "discuss" Steve's recent Coldplay article, which cast Damon as a pointless experimentalist, and also Damon's misguided belief that an editorial decision was made that Damon must be called fat and bald in the pages of *NME* throughout 2001. Having failed to track El Sutho down, Damon lightens up and decides to nip up onto the side of the stage to watch his mates the Beastie Boys. Except a security guard tells him that only band's family are allowed up there. And out leaps Nasty Damon once more.

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MAY 17, 2003

"THIS IS AN AFFRONT!" he huffs. "I've been up on that stage and given a piece of my soul tonight! I MUST see the Beastie Boys!"

We hoof it to the main arena, arriving after 45 minutes as Damon graciously stops for pictures and autographs and hugs old US touring buddies. Once we're stagefront, though, Damon watches approximately 45 seconds of the Beasties before declaring: "My ears aren't hearing

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anything they haven't heard before. Let's go and get a drink."

Reverting to nice Damon again as we prowl backstage, eyes peeled for bald former *NME* editors in cowboy hats, he drawls: "I really love the Beastie Boys. But I wouldn't want to be in the Beastie Boys because they don't have any soaring moments."

True, but perhaps they know the risk of doing a new album set in front of a festival crowd in a country that isn't exactly tired of your old material. "We could go out there and do a solid hour of hits," Damon states. "But we believe in our record. We decided right at the beginning, that we'd put the emphasis on this record and hopefully the strength of the songs would carry it through to an audience that were basically neutral. I know the Beastie Boys and they don't really want to be doing this sort of hits set. They'd much rather be playing what they're doing now."

Back at the trailer Damon holds forth enthusiastically for an hour on the Iraq war, The Libertines, *NME*, conspiracy theories, the Pixies, 3-D and David Blunkett before entrusting *NME* with the remains of his vodka barrel and heading off to his hotel. (*NME* nicks the barrel, obviously – we'll nick anything). At dawn, still ranting, he'll climb a hill to watch the sunrise, suddenly get really thirsty and fall foul of the lies they tell you on *Ray Mears' Extreme Survival*.

"I thought, 'Cactus! They've got water in them!'" he recalls ruefully, a week later. "So I tried to break open a cactus and I got cactus spines all in my hand. For anyone who wants to try that in the future, I didn't find any water in it."

And fatherhood is supposed to mellow you. This post-natal crazy-beast Albarn is bombing even though he is the bomb.

In the time between Coachella and *NME*'s next meeting with Albarn at London's Westbourne Studios a week later, Blur have reformed and split up again. Turns out Graham Coxon was booked as DJ for Alex's wedding months in advance, so an awful lot more bonding went on than the holy nuptials of bass twiglet and wife. "God knows how nervous Alex must've been," Damon explains, "the idea of all of us filling five or six hours together in a confined space and getting married. But it was all good, we all got on alarmingly well, just to confound our critics yet again. We had our photo taken, a mini photoshoot with all of us back together, which was funny. Odd, nice. We still looked exactly like a band, it was like he'd never been away. Nice to see Graham. He was on good form."

"I had a few quiet words with Graham, and the future is just as ambiguous as it's ever been... we've always said it probably isn't permanent"

DAMON ALBARN

Did the two of you have a heart-to-heart? "We had a few quiet words, so the future is certainly just as ambiguous as it's ever been. We've always said that it probably isn't permanent and after the wedding I would say it's probably as impermanent as we suspected it was."

There's a reunion on the cards so soon? Damon flashes on his halogen-lamp grin. It's blinding. Damon Albarn has a grin that annihilates any Liam sneer in a second. It's a grin that makes you realise that, at 34, the man is still ludicrously pretty. But even when sober there's a touch of the Jekyll and Hyde about him, switching instantly between snappy irritation and glowing good humour.

"Well, y'know, dysfunctional families always get together at weddings and funerals and it defines their next period. If they have a break and they get back, they're either in the right place again or they're not, but once you are a family the familiarity is there anyway. It's about everyone feeling comfortable."

There's been much speculation over the murky truth behind Graham Coxon's unexpected departure from Blur. Some claimed Damon wanted Coxo's grubby hands off the reins for good. Others suggested that Alex and Dave couldn't work with the recently-out-of-rehab booze fruit loop. So who made the final decision to tell Graham he wasn't needed anymore?

"The chronology of it was," Damon says, "we started in November, he didn't turn up, didn't tell us he wasn't turning up and subsequently wasn't around for nearly two months, within which time 'Think Tank' came into being, really. Then he came in and we were really thoroughly out-of-sync by that point because we'd spent two months working solidly and he'd been doing his own thing and it was difficult. The only thing that seemed to have any substance that we did together was 'Battery In Your Leg'.

"Everything else wasn't working and we'd done all of this work and, y'know, the consequence of him not being there in the beginning was that we had to finish it on our own."

Was he angry that you didn't tell him yourself?

"We did talk about it..." Across the studio cafe a cappuccino machine goes berserk, like the spirit of Graham sending a sliver of feedback from Sackedville.

"We talked about it," Damon continues, "but if we'd been able to talk about it properly we wouldn't have felt the need to part company at that point. It was only ⟶

On the anti-war march, January 2003

about communication, it's not about whether we get on with each other. He felt left out and we felt let down, it was a combination of that. I would've hoped it would happen to anyone in the band if they'd behaved the way he had initially. It probably wasn't managed in the perfect way at the end, but it wasn't managed in the perfect way at the beginning.

"We've fallen out so many times before, this isn't anything new, y'know? It used to be weeks and weeks we'd go without talking to each other and now it's just been a year. But all I can say is it was very nice at the wedding and confirmed the feeling we all have deep down that we're lifelong friends. It probably isn't the right record for Graham to work on but it certainly doesn't mean that once we're in the right space again, all of us, we won't be able to make another record together. I don't expect anything but I look forward to it".

"With Gorillaz it's nice because all I have to do is concentrate on the music. I didn't have to go through a daily cross-examination"

DAMON ALBARN

Joe Strummer said that as soon as you lose any original member of your group then the band is over.

"I don't think we've lost Graham," says Damon, getting stroppy again. "It's what it is. It's not trying to relive anything from the past, we're happy with what it is at the moment and whether it'll be like that next year remains to be seen. That's an absolute and it didn't stop Joe making music afterwards and not thinking it was any less important than the music he made before."

What about the story that you were driving through Camden, saw him walking down the street and you all shouted "WANKER" at him. Damon looks appalled: "NO! A few months ago we were going to a photoshoot and we were going really fast in a cab and we saw him walking up Parkway, so we went, 'WEEEEEAAHHH!' We didn't shout 'Wanker'!"

It's extremely good karma (as Alex would no doubt put it these days) that Blur and Graham Coxon should bury their various hatchets right now, just as Blur's seventh album 'Think Tank' is being hailed as one of their greatest artistic triumphs. 'Difficult' it may be. 'Parklife' it certainly is not.

But the defence puts it to this court that experimentation is the very lifeblood of alternative music; without it they'd all be morris dancing down Trash. It just depends how you use it: throw yourself blindly into new forms and species of musical wobbliness without keeping hold of a shred of the identity that made your band special in the first place and you'll end up like Radiohead, simply treading water in your vast new musical pools. But Blur are masters of chameleonic adaption, always striving to absorb new cultural and intercontinental influences while remaining, at heart, three (possibly four) blokes in a bloody great pop band. Hence 'Gene By Gene' has as much of a debt to pay to The Clash's 'Sandinista' as any Marrakesh bazaar, and 'We've Got A File On You' and 'Crazy Beat' are classic Blurpunk whether the pipe music tracks could be used to herd camels or not. And while it's considered naive to take Blur's reinventions at face value – 'Think Tank' was only made in the hope it might broaden intercultural understanding in a time of war – surely, artistically, Blur have one up on Radiohead this year?

"I'm glad that Radiohead exist," says Damon. "They're interesting and they're independent in the true sense of the word. Which is an issue I've always had since right at the beginning because we signed with a major label, albeit through a quasi-indie, and when we started it was C86, the zenith of indie music, and we always felt that independence was something... 'Parklife' was a very independent record. It happened to be very commercial but independence isn't defined by how many records you sell, it's how you think and act and conduct yourself".

Unlike, say, Coldplay. Didn't you recently join the ranks of not-quite-as-successful-as-Coldplay acts to have a pop?

"No, I wasn't having a go," says Damon. "What I actually said was that, having been asked to make a speech at the Brits, they gave us just one soundbite. I just felt that was a bit half-hearted, considering what's been happening and what will continue to happen."

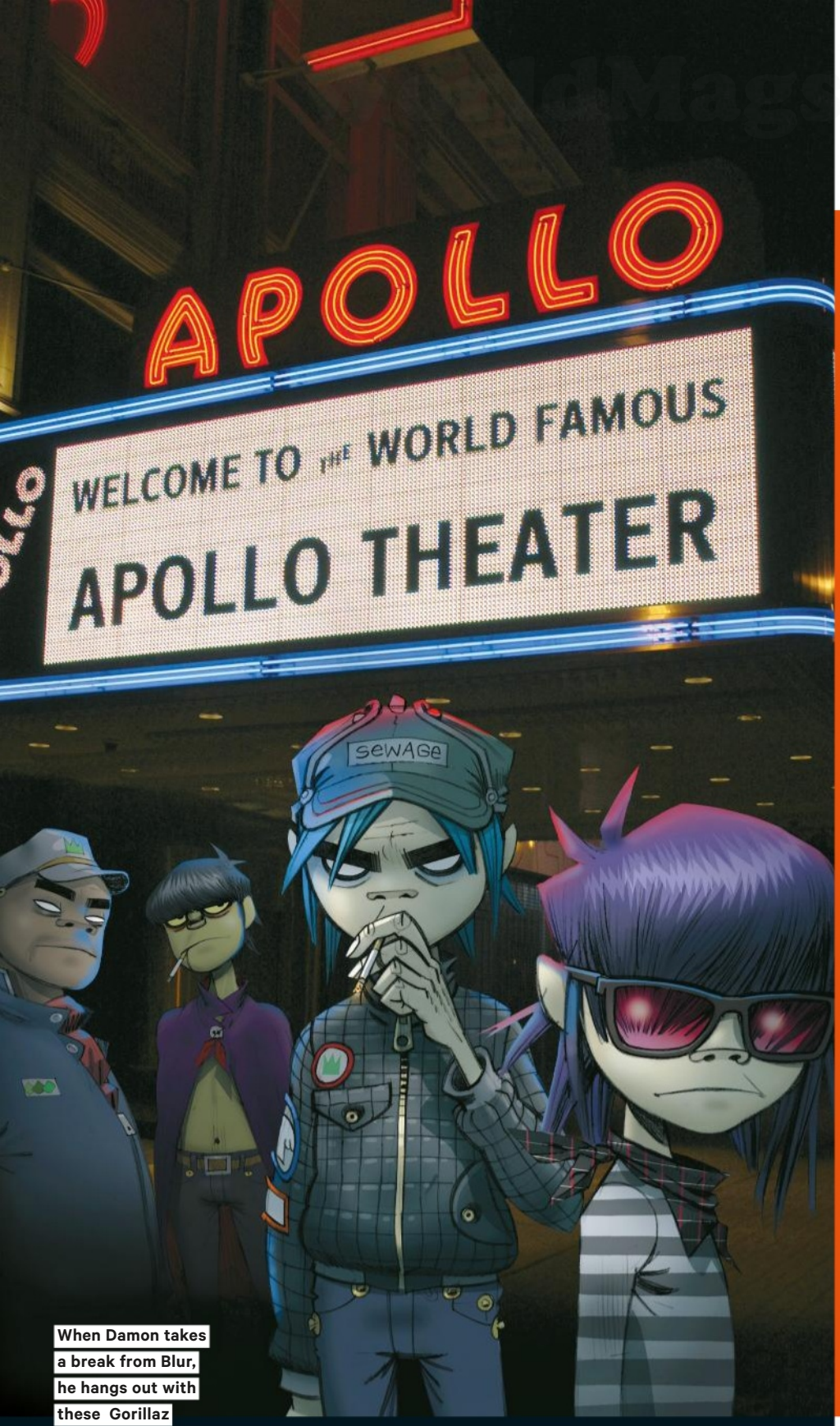
It was a speech which should've been made at the anti-war march. But you were too drunk to make it. "Well I did have a bit to drink at the march and I was really ashamed of myself for that," Damon admits. "But you've got to remember that half of the source of that over-emotional reaction was that my granddad, who was an original conscientious objector, went on hunger strike at the end of last year and died at the age of 90.

"I was with my dad and my sister and we were starting the march and I was really, really remembering my grandad and feeling very sad about it and wishing he'd have been able to see this march because it would've meant an enormous amount to him. No story that's reported is necessarily the full picture and sometimes I don't give the full picture because I don't want to divest that much of my private life, but that is the truth. It was a combination of drink and being upset about private things and I didn't portray myself in the best light and I totally admit that and I'm sorry if I let anyone down."

Great bands capture a generation: The Stone Roses, Sex Pistols, Nirvana, Coldplay. Legendary bands, meanwhile, capture a generation twice – Bowie, The Beatles, the various incarnations of Joy Division/New Order, perhaps. And Blur. Blur, more than any other contemporary group. Have the firm melodic identity and envelope-pushing incentive needed to become one of those bands that not only change the way music is appreciated, but change the way music is recorded.

Damon gives "a bit of my soul" onstage at Coachella, 2003

DAVID ELLIS, REX, RETNA



When Damon takes a break from Blur, he hangs out with these Gorillaz

The problem is, according to Damon, that Britpop's not finished yet.

"I feel that Britpop is so inextricably linked to Blairism," he says, "that until the end of that we're gonna have Britpop. It's just another development of it. What's come to replace Britpop? I think UK garage was the next thing. That still firmly had a very British identity, so therefore that was Britpop as well, really. I'm still Britpop, this record is Britpop. How can you revive something that hasn't finished? That's why that film [2003's *Live Forever*] was an ultimately empty experience, because it's not resolved until President Blair steps down."

Or maybe we're talking about President Albarn. We hear that the most poppy Blur songs were held off the album. Were they saved for Gorillaz?

Damon shrugs: "It's very cult to like Blur in America. With Gorillaz it was very nice because all I really had to do was concentrate on the music. I didn't have to do thousands of interviews and I didn't have to go through a daily cross-examination. So obviously, if you're talking about something of global proportions, that's preferable.

"The hardest part of making music for me is the cross-examination. Where I've always failed is through a combination of being over-emotional and quite straight-talking; people are highly suspicious. But in a way, if you're a cartoon, just by the nature of that medium, you can't be suspicious of a cartoon. Cartoons are wonderful things because they're exempt from a lot of the things that human politics demand of you." ■

What happened next...

Damon

Launched himself into a wide variety of solo works and collaborations, including three further albums with Gorillaz, two operas (*Monkey: Journey To The West* and *Dr Dee*) and other projects for the Manchester Festival and a far darker vision of modern Britain as The Good, The Bad And The Queen with The Verve's Simon Tong and The Clash's Paul Simonon. Also formed the side-project Rocket Juice & The Moon with Red Hot Chili Peppers' Flea and instigated the Africa Express and DRC Music projects which took contemporary artists into Africa to collaborate with local musicians.

Graham

Continued his successful and artistically feted solo career which saw his 2004 fifth album 'Happiness In Magazines' score alternative hits with 'Freakin' Out' and 'Spectacular' and its follow-up 'Love Travels At Illegal Speeds' produce the Top 20 hit 'Standing On My Own Again'. He also exhibited his artworks at the ICA in 2004 and worked with Pete Doherty on his debut solo album 'Grace/Wastelands'.

Alex

Buying a dilapidated farmhouse, Alex moved to his own very big house in the Cotswolds and transformed it into a working cheese farm, eventually winning awards for his goat's cheese and appearing on Radio 4's *On Your Farm*. He juggled this with a part-time career in media and publishing, writing a book about his years in the band, *A Bit Of A Blur*, and appearing on TV shows such as *Have I Got News For You*, *University Challenge* and BBC2's *Maestro*. In 2008 he made a documentary on Colombia's cocaine trade for American TV called *Cocaine Diaries: Alex James In Colombia*.

Dave

Dave's career during Blur's hiatus took several swerves. He directed two series of animated TV show *Empire Square* for Channel 4 and, in 2006, began training to be a solicitor. Between 2003 and 2009 he twice stood for election as a Labour party candidate for the Westminster County Council, but failed to win either seat.

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The songs reflect a new give-it-a-go approach and Albarn's broadening horizons

▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED November 2001-November 2002 **▶RELEASED** May 5, 2003 **▶ LABEL** Parlophone **▶PRODUCER** Ben Hillier, Norman Cook, William Orbit, Blur **▶STUDIO** 13 Studio, London; custom studios in Marrakesh and Dublin **▶ LENGTH** 56:04 **▶TRACKLISTING** ▶Me, White Noise 5 ▶Ambulance 7 ▶Out Of Time 9 ▶Crazy Beat 6 ▶Good Song 7 ▶On The Way To The Club 6 ▶Brothers And Sisters 6 ▶Caravan 7 ▶We've Got A File On You 6 ▶Moroccan Peoples Revolutionary Bowls Club 7 ▶Sweet Song 8 ▶Jets 5 ▶Gene By Gene 8 ▶Battery In Your Leg 8

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Think Tank

Relocated to Morocco, Blur lose a guitar player and find themselves. Also features: gospel blues, Fatboy Slim, and Damon playing a truck with a spanner

2003

It didn't start well. Following the emotional wrench of '13', Blur found themselves wrung dry. A well-publicised best-of album put a bookend on the Britpop years and the band were pulling in different directions: Graham was four albums into his solo career, coping with alcohol addiction and in and out of treatment, Dave was making in-roads into politics and Damon was already fusing pop and hip-hop behind the cartoon veneer of Gorillaz – and selling shedloads more records than Blur in the process. For a band who'd pointedly pushed forward as a team for the past decade, Blur's best next step was, for once, not clear.

It was in this amorphous state that the band decided to regroup in the studio in November 2001 and simply see what happened. Graham Coxon failed to show up on the first day, and by May 2002, he'd been told his services in the studio were no longer needed. The band dynamic shifted in an instant. Inspired by his work in Gorillaz, Damon took the reins, applying some of the collaborative thought he'd fostered in his side project and inviting The Dust Brothers and Norman 'Fatboy Slim' Cook to the studio to join project producer Ben Hillier. That was the to be final straw for Graham, who officially quit the band in absentia.

By September, Albarn's newfound penchant for globetrotting saw the band relocated to a riad in Morocco to finish the album. Trained pilots Alex and Dave flew themselves there, the entire band got dysentery within days, and they had to cobble together a studio from the equipment they managed to push past customs. Despite the tough conditions greeting them, producer Cook later described the scene on his arrival as being like "The Beatles at Rishikesh. People were doing yoga by the pool. Alex had gone to the desert to find himself – he came back wearing a robe having had some kind of epiphany."

The songs coming from the sessions reflected both the loose, give-it-a-go approach employed in the studio, and Albarn's broadening horizons. Finished tracks came out like demos, the fuzzy vocals of 'Caravan' sounding like they were done over the phone. Even the song titles had an unfinished feel: 'Sweet Song''s throwaway name, for example, captured its lullaby-like essence without fuss or pretension. Minus Coxon's virtuoso playing, Albarn filled in with his more rudimentary guitar skills. It placed a greater focus on rhythm than before, from 'Ambulance''s effected drum patterns to 'Gene By Gene''s hip-hop-goes-pop minimalism. 'Think Tank' was the closest Blur got to being Gorillaz or, perhaps, the furthest they got from being Blur.

There were nods to the past though. 'Crazy Beat' touched on the thrash of 'Song 2', albeit with a beat created by Albarn beating an old truck with a spanner, while 'Brothers And Sisters' brought bite to the gospel blues of 'Tender'. And despite the wheels falling off, the band managed to turn in some of their loveliest work. Single 'Out Of Time', in particular, was largely overlooked at the time, but an undoubted stand-out of their post-2009 comeback shows. There, and elsewhere, was a palpable sense of melancholy. The album's playful approach suggested boundless fun was being had in the studio, but the smiles were painted on.

'Think Tank' would be far from their most successful album. It was, in fairness, an oddity to end such an illustrious career with. But in retrospect, against the backdrop of Damon's incredibly productive decade to follow, it's a key part of the puzzle. Blur's reunion gigs, with Graham back on board, have been understandably light on material from 'Think Tank', bar the plaintive 'Battery In Your Leg', which Coxon played on, and the aforementioned 'Out Of Time'. "I was there in the crowd when they played at Glastonbury," Cook later commented. "'Out Of Time' gave me goosebumps. It's about Graham, isn't it?" ■ DAN STUBBS

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"The whole thing just been like we've been laughing all the time!"

CAMERA PRESS/PAUL POSTLE

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Ten years after they last played as a four-piece, the reformed Blur returned to the scene of their first ever gig as Seymour to warm up for their big Glastonbury comeback and reignite the old magic. Paul Stokes was there to stoke the engines...

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The dressing rooms at Colchester's East Anglian Railway Museum are, to say the least, a bit basic. Actually, as a museum devoted to steam engines and old rolling stock, it's quite reasonable for the institution found next door to the very quaint Chappel And Wakes Colne station to not have any dressing rooms at all. Predictably, though, it does have trains. Blur can look forward to the relative lap of luxury of the artists' village when they headline Glastonbury this weekend, but right now Damon Albarn, Graham Coxon, Alex James and Dave Rowntree are squashing themselves in the tiny compartment of a brake van.

Stacks of towels, trays of fruit and the band themselves are all fighting for space on the train-turned-museum-piece's hard wooden benches because tonight, Blur have picked this unlikely venue and this unlikely dressing room for their first public gig as a four-piece in nearly 10 years.

Since they told *NME* last December that not only were all the members of Blur friends again following Graham's acrimonious departure in 2002, but they were in the mood to play some gigs this summer, we knew whatever form this comeback show took was going to be special. There was a teaser as Damon and Graham linked up onstage at February's Shockwaves NME Awards to perform 'This Is A Low', but with word that the band would headline the closing night of Glastonbury plus their own giant shows at Manchester's MEN Arena and London's Hyde Park, it seemed only logical that Blur would road-test everything with a unique, intimate gig. Tonight's (June 13) show easily ticks both boxes. Just 150 souls, mainly locals, have bagged the wristbands allowing them to watch Blur prepare for their return in a converted goods shed. Indeed, of all the venues the band could have opted for, the East Anglian Railway Museum was probably not top of many people's lists, as they've only really hosted one gig here before anyway; it was a band called Seymour, way back in 1989...

"It was mine and my sister's birthday party," explains Damon of the first time he played here under the band's pre-Blur name. "It was my 21st!"

"Flipping heck!" exclaims Graham with a grin when confronted with the years that have passed between visits. "We only had about three songs back then, it was a 35-minute set. It will be longer tonight."

Back in '89 the band who would become Blur were just beginning to crystallise, having swapped their Essex roots for a metropolitan base around London's Goldsmith College. All four of them acknowledge that their first gig in front of actual people was a significant step forward.

"There was this big Albarn family party and we were like, 'Yeah, we can play!'" recalls Alex. "Damon's granny was here. She said we were good, but I think she was just being kind. We were very difficult to like in those days. Very drunk and terrifying actually."

"I remember loving that gig," muses Blur's singer. "We came off feeling we had something special and so it's good to come back here and realise that potential."

That potential seemed to have stalled after the band's seventh studio album, 'Think Tank'. Graham had departed, with 'Battery In Your Leg' his only recorded contribution to that release, and save for the occasional quote, Blur was placed into the deep freeze as, among other things, solo albums (Graham), operas (Damon), law degrees (Dave) and cheese (Alex) monopolised the band's time. Then, last Christmas, there was a thawing.

"I thought last year [when they were first asked to play Glastonbury] that was it. If it wasn't happening then it never would," explains Alex of his surprise at Blur's return. "I was actually halfway to Northumberland and the phone rang: 'It's back on, go and see Damon and Graham, they're best friends again.' But in terms of our lives it's been the best possible thing for all of us to do, to be on our own for a bit. I think it's wicked it's happening at the right time [for us] because we've all sort of worked out who we are anyway, and I think we're coming to this with the same sense of joy and preconceptions that we had to start with. When you start a band, it's the most fun thing with the people you love the most. After doing it for 10 years straight, it's still good but it does become work. This is not work now, it's something else."

However, when Damon and Graham announced last December they had not only buried the hatchet but were making their live return this summer, they admitted to *NME* that they were yet to play a note together. That process began in January when Blur began meeting once a week, initially working their way through each of their albums, playing every track in order.

"We had to do that to get our heads back into really becoming Blur experts," quips Alex. Not that they had entirely forgotten, of course.

"There were some special moments right at the beginning [of the rehearsals], the songs that are absolutely stuck under our skins for good, stuff like 'She's So High'," explains Graham, who kicked off the first rehearsal by jamming out the band's debut single and letting the others join in.

"It came together really early on because it has been like putting the Blues Brothers back together, breaking Rowntree out of law school and me out of my cheese factory," says Alex. "I got to the first rehearsal and Graham was playing 'She's So High' so I just joined in, Dave showed up and Damon arrived and we were off. The whole thing has just been lovely, we've been laughing all the time."

According to Damon, the band eventually settled on a number of songs that would produce a set two-and-a-quarter hours long – "but as we're not allowed to play that long at Glastonbury or Hyde Park we'll have to see if there's a consensus in the band on the day and take it from there" – which they have been rehearsing "intensely" for the last few weeks.

Indeed, as *NME* arrived at the East Anglian Railway Museum on a blazing hot afternoon, those songs were being rehearsed one last time. Working their way through a lengthy soundcheck, rather like their recently released 'Midlife' collection, the songs slip between their hits (or the "high street" route to Blur as Graham terms it) and the more interesting crannies (the "back streets" à la Coxon) of their back catalogue. It creates a surreal yet eccentrically English moment as one of the museum's steam trains, decked out to look like Thomas The Tank Engine, puffs up and down soundtracked by the likes of 'Charmless Man', 'Oily Water' and 'Trimm Trabb', which boom out of the small hall.

"I like the mixture, I like the fact that we go all over the shop," says Graham of the set. "I like the high street, I use the high street a lot, but I also like trouncing about in the middle of nowhere and that's what the set is like, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's not exclusive," agrees Damon. "It's all-inclusive, this ticket."

It's also a very hot ticket. As the small friends-and-family crowd gather when Blur take to their makeshift stage around eight-ish, more fans gather outside the museum's fence straining to peer in through the windows, catching the songs on the night breeze.

It's worth it, because from the moment Graham strikes the opening note of 'She's So High' it seems amazing that anyone has coped with Blur's absence for so long. Taut and powerful, the song sounds as vital as ever, the band immediately recognisable as the same one responsible for the likes of 'Modern Life Is Rubbish' and 'Parklife'. There are no cobwebs to blow off, no nostalgic gimmicks; this band interrupted are simply picking up from where they left off. Alex cuts the same sophisticated debonair stance while twanging his bass as he always did, and Graham is the same fizzing mix of nervous energy and stunning guitar work. Dave drums relentlessly in the middle, driving the band on and Damon re-emerges as the same whirling dervish frontman, half chaotic showman (crowdsurfing during 'Advert'), half musical genius.

"We were very difficult to like in those days – drunk actually"

Alex James

NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS
JUNE 27, 2009

Barely pausing between songs despite the sweaty evening, the band play practically the perfect Blur set. 'Beetlebum'? Check. 'For Tomorrow'? Check. 'Bad Head' ("This song is about hangovers," says Damon, "not that we want to encourage that kind of behaviour.")? Check. Even the poppier moments that the group were supposedly a bit embarrassed about? Check. 'Parklife' is delivered entirely by Damon (*Quadrophenia* actor Phil Daniels is due at the bigger shows), while 'Country House' is delivered straight. That's right, not cajun or calypso as rumoured, but just as it was recorded.

"We had a look at doing it more acoustically, but we thought, 'Nah, it doesn't really work', so it's got a whole new lease of life," Damon later explains of his prodigal song's return. "Did I enjoy singing it tonight? Yeah, of course!"

"There are some songs we feel obliged to put in and when we played them we thought, 'Ah, this is actually quite good fun!'" agrees Graham. "I associate 'Country House' more with the bulbous, freaky character of the song now rather than anything else."

Of course there was never a question over the likes of 'This Is A Low' ("It's just a symbolic song for everybody," notes Graham), 'Song 2' (which the band start slowly, building up the drums before the track really explodes), 'End Of A Century' (which ends with Damon and Graham sharing a mic, the singer hugging the guitarist) or 'Popscene' being in the set, but notably, two tracks from 'Think Tank' are also included.

'Out Of Time"'s guitar-shaped hole is finally filled by Graham's beautifully assured Telecaster, and free of the dark clouds that surrounded its recording, 'Battery In Your Leg' feels like an onstage epiphany.

"I found something extra in that today, we took that to a slightly different place than we have before," explains Dave. "It's really nice when that works, when you all have an idea simultaneously and you push it somewhere and it's great when that kind of thing happens."

Naturally, in its home county, 'Essex Dogs' wins a crowd vote over first album track 'Sing' (*NME* and Graham were among those on the losing side) to join the setlist – next time we hear it, it will be enhanced by a choir – before it's time to wrap things up with the gig pushing the two-hour mark.

"If you want to catch the 10.13, you'd better go," Damon warns the crowd as he's informed about the last train approaching the nearby station. The East Anglian Railway Museum Comeback Special then ends with a soaring version of 'The Universal' and heartfelt thank yous.

"I guess the last time we played these songs we'd been playing them for years and years and years. That's good, because you get this honed, polished thing going on, but they don't really give you much back," observes Alex, acknowledging the emotional impact the reformation has had. "Now, playing these songs I'm getting so much. There was a great column in *The Spectator* this week; the pop writer was saying The Beatles are his favourite band but when he listens to the records now, it's completely dead. There's nothing from it. But suddenly playing these songs after a 10-year gap it's the opposite."

"You can get tired of stuff. That happens when you play a song a lot," Damon later agrees. "It's what happens to any band in the world. It's why we're fortunate in a way to have had a break for 10 years, so to speak."■

Parklife!

Almost overshadowed by the death of Michael Jackson days earlier, Blur's long-awaited live comeback took in the biggest UK festivals of 2009. NME got down the front...

DANNY NORTH

GLASTONBURY

PYRAMID STAGE

SUNDAY JUNE 26, 2009

Supposedly Michael Jackson's plastic ghost just shat in Damon's champagne. Yeah, bad luck Blur, we know this was supposed to be the moment that Michael Eavis handed you the keys to the planet, but unfortunately the world has closed for business until Jackson and Lady Di return to save our melodramatic arses. But ignore that, because for two hours tonight *we* all did. Sunday is Blur's night, and from the first strains of 'She's So High', it's clear that they aren't willing to give it up. This is a real headline set and the band are embracing it – there's no shirking of their classics here, no snobbish disowning of the songs the public actually want to hear. And while Damon's opera crowd may turn their nose up at the sirloin pleasure of 'Country House', we, the people, are fucking happy about it. And so are the band.

These four have returned to the British stage just in time. They are no plump grandfathers of past pop, and they are still lean and pretty enough (ignore Dave) to be current. Why? Because they have an agenda. Despite the millions of sales, did they ever really burn their names into the hearts of the people? No, not really, and they know that. Liam was sexy, Jarvis was smart and Damon was arrogant: that was the Britpop truism, and even ignoring Tony Blair's double-edged invitation wasn't enough to change that. But now, this has all changed. Damon is a British statesman, revered nationally more like cockney Pinter than mockney Suggs and tonight they are erasing the Cool Britannia aberration, without apology, just with aplomb. 'Parklife' was always going to be easy. 'Beetlebum'? Yeah, we knew its chaotic soaring yawn would envelop the crowd as it does tonight. 'Tracy Jacks' blew a smile into the Glasto turf, as anyone could have guessed; 'This Is a Low' destroyed 80,000 hearts, just as we knew it would.

But 'Country House'? That was the moment they forgave themselves, and in doing so finally emerged as the biggest band in Britain (a title they so deliberately ran from by diving into '13"s murky doom). It was redemptive for them, and for us. Sorry the world – from New York to Tokyo may be your flowered memorial ground, but Britain is for Blur. Hands off. ■ ALEX MILLER

T IN THE PARK

MAIN STAGE,

SUNDAY JULY 12, 2009

Bluuuuuughr! Graham Coxon is ill, T In The Park head honcho Geoff Ellis announces from the Main Stage in the early evening to a predictable cascade of boos. The guitarist is supposedly puking up his guts in a nearby hospital. It's bad news – and it gets worse. Snow Patrol have had their "co-headline" (ha!) set shifted back to bide time for the guitarist's recovery. If Coxon doesn't make it, Gary Lightbody and co might end up headlining this thing.

Clearly, this can't be allowed to happen. So at 9.15pm – half an hour before Blur were supposed to have started – the announcement comes. He's OK. On his way. Blur will headline T In The Park. An hour passes...

When Blur finally traipse onstage at 10.15 for their final scheduled live show, Graham raises his arm in a show of strength before strapping on his axe, looking significantly healthier than most of the bands who have played T over the weekend. Not saying much considering The View and Pete have been in and out in the last 24 hours, but still.

It's never been up in the air whether Blur could pull off topping T. In a way, with the set shorn short due to Graham's gut-twistings, they've got it even easier – everything tonight can be called an 'enormous hit'. T crowds might piss against walls more than most, but they also pogo more than most – at least a foot higher for 'Girls & Boys' and 'Country House'. "We nearly didn't make it," Damon says. "Graham literally walked out of a hospital to come here." Then the semi-bombshell. "This is our last gig."

Well, we knew there were no more dates on MySpace. And with the band continually swatting away questions about new material, there's nothing left to rehearse for. The set is wonderfully epic: 'Tender' is a diaphragm-ripping heartache, with encore finale 'The Universal' sending adrenaline pumping around Scottish veins. Albarn says a simple "Goodbye" and grins. When the sick buckets are emptied he'll have to decide whether this is worth sticking with – as ever, it'll be down to his whims. But really, you'd have to be a bit ill in the head – let alone the stomach – not to want to run with this.

■ JAMIE FULLERTON

WorldMags.net

OUT OF TIME?

Blur have confirmed, denied, rumoured and refuted a new record for several years – even going so far as to start recording in Hong Kong in 2013. But will there be an eighth Blur album? Here's what they've said...

"It's a frightening thought, because there's a pressure on us to record another album, and of course we quite like the idea. But what's stopping us is the pressure. People are saying they want one, and that's making us panic. We like to create our stuff in a relaxed way. It's no good trying to force it just because people want to hear it. It would be a big decision. Because we know what'd come after the recording: we'd have to do a lot of travelling and playing. Which is great fun, but it's a big commitment, obviously."

Graham, July 9, 2012, vulture.com

"We thought it would be a good time to try to record another record, so we're going to make one here in Hong Kong."

Damon, May 7, 2013 at the Asia World Expo, Hong Kong

"'@khaniboy: @grahamcoxon Is there a new Blur album coming out? If so, when?' No"

November 26, 2012, NME.com via Twitter

"I've said it a million times. I mean, I always get cast as the bad guy in what seems like a very... sort of circular discussion. All of us are doing other stuff at the moment. I feel like we put in a good shift last year, admittedly not in this country, but we played everywhere else in the world. I gave my heart and soul to it all. But this year, and maybe next year, maybe the year after that, I'm doing other stuff. That doesn't mean that in three years' time we're gonna do a record! But I love making music with those guys. Honestly, if all of us collectively feel 'this is the best thing we could possibly be doing, collectively, now', we'll do it again. But until that happens, we won't do it again [...] We recorded 15 songs but I mean, just because you record 15 ideas doesn't mean that you've got an album [...] For us, that's just probably the first quarter of a record 'cos you edit it a lot and make sure you get the best stuff in the end."

Damon, February 26, 2014, NME.com

"So Damon's touring with Blur – he's doing a world tour with Blur at the moment and then they're working on a new album so there isn't really time for [Gorillaz]."

Jamie Hewlett, June 24, 2013, NME

"I'm not recording any music but I'm going to do some shows with the big band – Blur – and just go to some fun places and play to some people."

Graham, February 13, 2013, BBC News

"There is material [...] But I can't foresee us in the near future being in a position to finish it. We're just all doing other stuff."

Damon, February 24, 2014, Rolling Stone

"I'm definitely going to do a few more of those seven-inches [Blur recorded 'Fool's Day', their first new song for seven years, for Record Store Day 2010]. I love the no pressure aspect. We can't do it all the time. I don't want anyone to think there's an album coming soon, it's not possible, but we've got songs!"

Damon, May 10, 2010, NME.com

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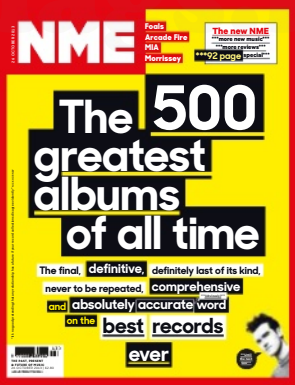

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